

The Moral Basis of Family Relationships in the plays of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: a
Study in Renaissance Ideas.

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ABSTRACT.

Families transact their relationships in a number of ways. Alongside and in tension with the emotional and practical dealings of family life are factors of an essentially moral nature such as loyalty, gratitude, obedience, and altruism. Morality depends on ideas about how one should behave, so that, for example, deciding whether or not to save a brother's life by going to bed with his judge involves an ethical accountancy drawing on ideas of right and wrong. It is such ideas that are the focus of this study. It seeks to recover some of ethical assumptions which were in circulation in early modern England and which inform the plays of the period. A number of plays which dramatise family relationships are analysed from the imagined perspectives of original audiences whose intellectual and moral worlds are explored through specific dramatic situations. Plays are discussed as far as possible in terms of their language and plots, rather than of character, and the study is eclectic in its use of sources, though drawing largely on the extensive didactic and polemical writing on the family surviving from the period. Three aspects of family relationships are discussed: first, the shifting one between parents and children, second, that between siblings, and, third, one version of marriage, that of the remarriage of the bereaved. The moral bases of all these relationships are derived in part from explicit precept, such as the requirement to honour parents, in part from cultural mores which shaped expectations about, for example, the treatment of elderly parents, and in part from a largely undefined sense of how things should be and were in the world. This last brings into play the concept of nature, an elusive but crucial point of reference for the moral basis of family life and often perceived as the drive behind behaviour. A play, therefore, may be a dynamic representation of the coming together of multiple ethical strands in specific circumstances in which sometimes conflicting ideas and impulses are worked out. The thesis is informed by the conviction that literature can yield understandings that are beyond the reach of linear reasoning and accessible only by an imaginative transcending of rationality. So, for example, when a homeless old king is bewildered by the breakdown of family morality as he sees it, and casts about for reasons, he must try out different explanations none of which is satisfactory on its own, and has therefore to attempt a synthesis of incompatible ideas which can be achieved only intuitively through the medium of poetic drama.

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Finally, an impersonal thanks must go to “the blind Fury with th'abhorred shears” for keeping away.

CONVENTIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS.

Usage.

Honorary titles are presumed to have died with their owners, so Philip Sidney's knighthood expired with him at Arnhem. It would be pedantic to call Dr Johnson anything else.

Modernisation is sparing. I have transcribed the texts I used, and modernised only by changing vv to w and u to v when appropriate, persuaded by hearing of an American student spending a miserable semester wondering what "loue" could possibly be.

Although there seems to be a modern tendency to use the word "ethics" about money and "moral" about sex, I treat the words as synonyms and use them interchangeably.

I have assumed a familiarity with Shakespeare's plots, but have summarised those of more obscure plays.

Editions.

Except where otherwise identified, all references to Shakespeare are to *The Complete Works*. Edited by Alfred Harbage. London: Allen Lane at the Penguin Press, 1969. The texts of other plays have been chosen mainly on the basis of convenience of access.

Quotations from the Bible are from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition; with an Introduction by Lloyd E. Berry*. Madison ; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

Abbreviations.

BCP: Cummings, Brian, ed. *The Book of Common Prayer : The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Bullough: Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 1957.

DNB: Dictionary of National Biography.

Eliz. BCP: *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth, 1559, To Which Are Appended Some Occasional Forms of Prayer Issued in Her Reign*. London: Griffith Farran, 1890.

Florio's Montaigne: Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essayes of Michael, Lord of Montaigne*. Edited by Henry Morley. Translated by John Florio. London: Routledge, 1893.

OED: Oxford English Dictionary.

Partridge: Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy : A Literary & Psychological Essay and a Comprehensive Glossary*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.

Schmidt: Schmidt, Alexander. *Shakespeare Lexicon : A Complete Dictionary of All the English Words, Phrases and Constructions in the Works of the Poet*. Berlin: G. Reimer, 1902.

Schoenbaum: Harbage, Alfred Bennett. *Annals of English Drama, 975-1700 ... Revised by S. Schoenbaum*. London: Methuen & Co., 1964. Williams: Williams, Gordon. *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*. London: Athlone Press, 1994.

Tilley: Tilley, Morris Palmer. *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period*. Ann Arbor, 1950.

A German ambassador once told me he cdn't bear

St Paul

he was, he said, so hard on fornication.

Ezra Pound, Canto LXXI.

JOHNSON: "Now had I been an Indian, I must have died early: my eyes would not have served me to get food. . . . I should have been dead before I was ten years old. Depend upon it, Sir, a savage when he is hungry, will not carry about with him a looby of nine years old who cannot help himself. They have no affection." BOSWELL: "I believe natural affection, of which we hear so much, is very small." JOHNSON: "Sir, natural affection is nothing: but affection from principle and established duty, is sometimes wonderfully strong." LOWE: "A hen, Sir, will feed her chickens in preference to herself." JOHNSON: "But we don't know that the hen is hungry"

Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, 20 & 21.iv.1783.

CHAPTER ONE.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT.

When Lear is pretending to auction his kingdom in the opening scene of *King Lear*, he has laid down that the currency in which the bids are to be made is that of love: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most ... ?” What is actually at issue, it soon turns out, is language, descriptions of affection in the flattering style of a masque, brought out by the constant reiteration of “speak ... says speak”, and then, when Cordelia is silent, “Mend your speech a little”.¹ The two older daughters enter into the spirit of the occasion and describe their love, as Lear prompts them to, in terms of quantity, of comparatives and superlatives, and their hyperbole uses the language of commerce (“dearer”, “rich”, “worth”, “short”). Cordelia is unable, or refuses, to outbid her sisters, but makes her response not using the language of feeling but of morality, drawing on concepts of duty, gratitude, obedience, and honour.² In the ensuing dialogue, Lear interrogates her about the interaction of morality and emotion: “Goes thy heart with this? ... so untender?”, and she replies with a further ethical appeal: “true”. Her “trueness” has an immediate market valuation put on it (“Thy truth then be thy dower”) and a second auction ensues, between her two suitors now that she brings with her no substantial landholding. Up to this point the only sincere emotion has been anger, that of Lear and of Kent, but as the long opening episode of the play draws to a close, what looks like genuine affection makes an appearance. Appropriately enough in the paradoxical situation, love is caught in a series of oxymorons spoken by the king of France to his bride:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised

This is followed by the scratchy parting of the Cordelia and her sisters, who she is never to meet again, conducted in the same mode as the earlier charade, with emotion set against morality, but now it is Cordelia who alludes to emotion, telling them that she knows they do not love their father, to which Regan retorts in the language of morals:

1 M. C. Bradbrook, *The Living Monument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 156

2 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Prescribe not us our duties.

When her sisters were earlier making their protestations, Cordelia was soliciting the collusion of the audience with a series of asides which staked out her claim to virtue, a claim reinforced when she starts to speak, for the honour she tenders her father had an important connotation as the explicit requirement of the fifth Commandment:

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.³

Everybody in an early audience knew about this. The Commandments were dinned into children as they learned their Catechism, they were repeated week in, week out, in the Church's liturgy, and were on display in every church to be read by anyone who could read. The duty to honour one's parents, therefore, amounted to "official" morality (this is explored in my next chapter), and Cordelia was doing what she was supposed to. *Loving* one's parents, however, was a less obvious expectation. There was a duty to "love, honour, and succour my father and mother" set out in the Catechism, but only as one example of loving one's neighbours, and there was no general assumption that relationships between parents and their children were necessarily reciprocal:

For common experience teacheth us in these dayes, that the love of Fathers to theyr children is verie great: but the affection of children to theyr Parentes verie small: we see what care Fathers have over the state of theyr children, and what negligence children have over theyr Fathers: and therefore it may be saide verie well, that love by nature dooth descend, but not ascend, it descendeth from the Father to the Sonne, but it ascendeth not from the sonne to the Father, wherein the love of the Father appeareth more and the love of the childe less: but what is the cause, that the love of the Father is more effectuall, then the childes good will to the Father? the reason is, ... Because the roote shall sooner rotte, then the braunch shall send backe its influence unto it.⁴

This is expressing a commonplace, echoing, for example, an argument by Montaigne, who

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- 3 *Exodus*, XX: 12; cf. *Deuteronomy*, V: 16; this Commandment is number five in Protestant churches, number six in Roman Catholic ones.
- 4 William Averell, *A Dyall for Dainty Darlings, Rockt in the Cradle of Securitie. A Glasse for All Disobedient Sonnes to Looke In. A Myrroure for Vertuous Maydes, Etc.* (London: For Thomas Hackette, 1584). D2v.

observed that “the care which each living creature hath to his preservation” is the basis of parents' affection for their children, and that as children have no such motive,

... it is no wonder if back-again it [affection] is not so great from children unto fathers.⁵

Having gestured towards her moral credentials, Cordelia then attempts to retrieve the situation by looking to discredit her sisters' sincerity. She points out that they are married, which she suggests cannot be reconciled with their protestations to their father:

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 love and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.⁶ (I.i.90)

The argument is muddled, but its drift is clear enough, and for the first time Cordelia's thinking has become unconventional. The relative claims of husband or father are set out clearly when Desdemona presents her marriage as a *fait accompli*:

My dear father,
I do perceive here 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 must profess

5 Florio's Montaigne, 192.

6 The last line is omitted from the 1623 Folio.

Due to the Moor my lord. (*Othello*, I.iii.180)

There's no doubt that Desdemona's was the more usual idea about marriage. A couple were not supposed to share their love with anyone except each other (and, though a different form of love, with children), for in the marriage service the husband is explicitly told that he must leave his parents behind, and the wife is handed over to her husband by her father or other person⁷. To undertake to share her love equally between husband and father, as Cordelia intends to do, may have the purpose of discrediting her sisters' claims to love their father "all", but it goes against what was thought of as normal marriage.⁸

THE TAXONOMY OF A PLAY.

This opening scene of *King Lear* has four dramatic elements in a dynamic tension. There are the characters involved, principally Lear and his daughters, what they are like and why they behave as they do. Why does this irascible old man engage in such an absurd charade, why is Cordelia silent, are the older sisters as insincere as Cordelia claims? The personal qualities of the participants of the scene shape its second dramatic feature, its plot, the unfolding of events started by a mishandled abdication, accelerated by vanity and misunderstanding, and the introduction of all the elements of the impending tragedy. Third there is the language of the scene, not just what is said but how it is said, the dependence of meaning on expression, as Lear's hyperbole, Cordelia's silence, the lubricious phrasing of Gloucester's reminiscence about Edmund's conception. Finally, the scene depends on ideas: about love in families, children's responsibilities for their parents, a subject's duty to a king, a king's obligations to his commonwealth, and about the very nature of family relationships.

These ideas are the subject of this dissertation. It is a study of the moral basis of family relationships as they were represented in English plays before the closing of the theatres in 1642. Its organising question is how people in the period were supposed to behave in families, with the subsidiary question of why they should. The opening of *King Lear* identified morality as one of the bonds holding families together and the rest of the play shows these bonds destroyed by an

7 The rubric which instructs the man to "take" the woman's right hand recalls the preamble to the service which cautions that marriage is not "to be taken in hand unadvisedly".

8 The resemblance between Cordelia's initial response to her father to the promises made by a bride to love, honour, and obey, has been pointed out with wearisome frequency.

unstoppable emotional assault which sweeps aside the claims of duty and gratitude. The emotions doing the damage are listed by Poor Tom in the hovel as anger, pride, envy, hate, lust, and greed: six of the seven deadly sins, with only sloth not at work.⁹ By the time Lear has met Poor Tom he has realised what audiences, prompted by Cordelia, knew from the start, that the love he had solicited is meaningless, and with clumsy irony his characteristic complaint about his Cynthers quickly becomes the very moral claim he had rejected in Cordelia, that of gratitude.

Family relationships have been the subject of drama since Aeschylus. In England the earliest surviving plays feature the unscriptural character of Noah's wife disrupting family harmony by maliciously pointing out that many of the animals filing into the Ark are predators ready to feed on the others, by refusing to leave her gossips, and by physically abusing her husband.¹⁰ The entertainment value of (other people's) marriages typified by that of the Noahs was to become a staple of the commercial theatre when the playhouses began to open in the 1570s, though alongside the humour, and often blended with it, went an awareness of the potential for tragedy in family life when the "clout" given to Noah developed into the lethal violence of an Alice Arden or an Othello. Another regular story in early English vernacular drama was the murder of Abel by his brother with its dramatic possibilities of the violence present in some families, and the prototype of the fraternal antagonism at the basis of many plays, even of the relatively genial comedy *As You Like It*. Another regular story, one which illustrates relationships between generations and their moral complexity is that of Abraham, required by God to sacrifice his "only son Isaac whom thou lovest".¹¹ The Chester cycle, in particular, enlarged the Biblical account, itself a masterly piece of narrative suspense, into a moving exploration of a basic human relationship, and also brought out a supplementary question about the limits of the claims of a family over its members.¹² For Abraham there was a tension, real and painful as it appears in the Chester play, caused by the conflicting loyalties of a father to his son and to his God, though it's clear that obedience to God came before family affection: such tensions were to be a fruitful source of creativity in plays which involved the interactions between families as social groups and the world outside the domestic.

9 The point is developed in Chapter 5.

10 Hermann Deimling and Matthews, eds., *The Chester Plays*, Early English Text Society. Extra Series 62, 115 (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1893)., 51 – 58; Noah's estimable wife, who doesn't get a name either in the Bible or the plays, appears also in the York cycle of "mystery" plays, and, in a less awkward mood, in the "Coventry" cycle.

11 *Genesis*, XXII:1 – 14. Isaac was not, in fact, Abraham's only son; he had a half-brother Ishmael.

12 *Chester Plays*, 72 – 83.

The earliest English plays, therefore, introduce the three aspects of family relationships to be discussed in this study: those between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, and in (one form of) marriage. I assume a workable separation between the moral and emotional bases of family life which emerged in the language of Lear's daughters. This involves an emphasis on qualities like loyalty, duty, commitment, and selflessness, aspects of life which are less exciting than jealousy or desire, and Mrs Noah is much more fun than her husband conscientiously obeying God's instructions. These qualities tend to be mildly embarrassing when made explicit, but anyway don't mean much as abstractions, and acquire dramatic life only when they are distilled into specific dilemmas and choices. The fundamental question is how one family member should behave towards another gives shape to such dilemmas in the plays with which I am concerned. Should a woman with a household to look after be expected to take in a difficult and unpleasant old man simply because he happens to be her father? And when he's made life intolerable, why should she not throw him out? What gives this old man entitlements from his daughter that she is not expected to extend to the destitute beggars bullied in one parish after another, and when her father ends up joining these beggars, what is that to his daughter? If a man condemned to death for a crime he has undoubtedly committed happens to have a sister who can secure a reprieve by going to bed with his judge, can he not reasonably expect that she will, and on what grounds might she hesitate? Should the same woman exploit the judge's susceptibility to save the life of another criminal to whom she is not related? If a brother and sister are sexually attracted to one another, why is there any objection to their enjoying one another as other couples do? If a bereaved woman quickly takes another husband, why should she be an object of derision, and why are her son's objections, and his animadversions on her sex life, any more than impertinence? And if the only way to save a parent's life (and put off receiving an inheritance) is to commit a serious crime, how should a conscientious young man behave?

THE AUDIENCE AND ITS IDEAS.

Tilmouth has explored early modern ideas about appetite and self control reflecting much the same distinctions between emotion and morality as mine.¹³ His concentration is on the interaction between what he calls passion and reason, whereas the focus of this study is these interactions as dramatic spectacles, events on stage subject to the appraisal of audiences using moral ideas specific to individual situations. What Isabella decides in *Measure for Measure*, therefore, is

¹³ Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion's Triumph over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

between two moral options, not between morality and immorality, lust and continence (though appetite in contention with reason would be a fair description of Angelo's losing battle with himself). An audience in the theatre might be induced to approve the incest in *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*, but the approval would be specific to that play, not necessarily generalised into a broad moral tolerance. And it's the moral thinking which influenced it which is my subject. To pursue the example of Isabella, her merits were highly thought of in the nineteenth century, though her stock fell in the twentieth, but the question for this study is what Jacobean audiences thought about her decision and why they thought it. There is accordingly a ghostly presence in what follows, the imagined Renaissance people whose patronage gave us these plays, though "imagined" does not mean a heritage fantasy of ruffs and codpieces, but an attempt to detach early modern moral standards and beliefs from those of later periods.¹⁴ In this instance of *Measure for Measure*, the response to the play may in some cases have been coloured by knowledge of its source, which means that ideas brought to the playhouse were specific ones about plot and motivation, but there was also the common stock of ideas, in particular those relating to personal morality, circulating in the society from which these audiences were drawn. It is these that this study attempts to recover.

We can be certain that there was a range of available responses, not a monolithic morality to which everybody subscribed. Most people in late Elizabethan England no doubt saw Juliet as the tragic heroine she is described as in the play's prologue and in its closing lines, but there was probably a minority who thought she was a frightful little whore who got what she deserved. Again, most people were probably entertained by Juliet's nurse, though a few might have seen her as a foul-mouthed procuress (Juliet and her nurse are the subject of Chapter 6). It's doubtful, though, whether anybody in the original audience of *Romeo and Juliet* thought that Romeo should be prosecuted for having sex with an under-age child, as he would be in most developed societies today. This suggests that a modern adjudication on whether Juliet was or was not a whore would be a value judgement with no intrinsic meaning, and interesting only in the context of a climate of thought that held "whore" to be a valid category.

The tension between the image of Juliet that has been built up in the early part of the play and her father's opinion of her when she baulks at marrying Paris (which anyway she can't, as she's

¹⁴ The reader will find little interest evinced in ruffs in the following pages. I have the impression that codpieces were passing out of use by the middle of the period with which this study is concerned, but did not feel it necessary to pursue the subject.

already married to Romeo) confirms that there was no simple moral standard against which to measure an audience's response to a play. There is no hint in Capulet's diatribe that his daughter is the tragic figure described in the Prologue, and it's significant that she gets much less sympathy in Shakespeare's source. Capulet is calling in an accepted morality in his demand for obedience, and the fine line between arranged and forced marriage was a real one in the period which occurs frequently in drama. Sweet Anne Page and her parents in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are the exact counterparts of Juliet's and hers, even to the premature calling a preferred suitor "son" despite the girl's lack of agreement. The one is tragedy, the other more like farce, but both make dramatic sense only if there existed diverse ideas about sexual propriety, the process of becoming married, the behaviour of servants, and all the rest of possibilities of how to manage a family correctly. Among the audiences of both plays the parents of young daughters would doubtless have had different preoccupations from those of the daughters themselves, who in turn would most likely have come to see things differently when watching the play again twenty years later. If such speculation is right, we can perhaps assume a majority view that in this example love should prevail over duty, emotion over morality, but this would be located in the troubles of a single dramatic romance, even though it might indeed be part of a more general ascendancy of passion over moral austerity which Tilmouth persuasively describes. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, moreover, wetnurses in the audience would not have made the same identifications as people who employed nurses or had been fed by one, but the moral issues about wetnursing were live ones in the period, though the debate was a closed one in that it drew only selectively on any wider system of values. Equally, servants and masters will have brought their own interests to the playhouse, as will wives and husbands, and whatever these variations, they will have belonged in the common pool of ideas that I am trying to locate.

FINDING THE IDEAS.

There are a number of ways for a modern reader to recover these ideas. In some cases there are formal discussion in the plays themselves. *The Mousetrap*, the play within the play in *Hamlet*, raises some of the issues involved in remarriage, and in *The Old Law* the extent of responsibility for elderly parents is debated in a courtroom setting, but for the most part the moral issues are implicit. There was no set of rules to cover any eventuality. The Ten Commandments had the authority of being well known and having behind them the power of church and state, but they are silent on many areas of life and required adapting to cover others. The Seven Deadly Sins

provided a useful checklist, but their status in Protestant England was uncertain, since they had probably been originally developed to prepare for auricular confession which was not supposed to be practised in the period. Guidance from scripture was piecemeal. There were detailed rules about personal conduct in *Leviticus*, with an emphasis on sexual misdemeanours and their punishment, though they seem to have been recognised as too draconian for the needs of an emerging modern society. St Paul offered advice on some aspects of family life, but this was not systematic, and his lack of enthusiasm for marriage was at odds with the practices of almost all societies. The teachings of Jesus didn't include much of a detailed nature about domestic life, though His appearance at a wedding feast endorsed marriage in the view of the English Church. And throughout the Bible were stories and events involving families as examples to be followed or eschewed, but these represented an uncertain guide, as David, for example, got away with things that were not tolerated in late Tudor England.

There are always plenty of people ready with advice and admonitions about personal conduct, and I have drawn freely on the sizeable body of didactic and polemical writing about family relationships from the period.¹⁵ My original intention had been to attempt to correlate in a systematic way the ideas in this genre with the dramatic moral dilemmas to which they related, but it was quickly apparent that this would not work. Copious as it was, this writing was limited in its coverage and inconsistent in approach, and there is no clear distinction between didactic books, telling people to behave, and polemical ones, often intending to be funny, about behaviour itself. There are, accordingly, wearisome lists of the shortcomings of women or the woes of the married state, but much less about how to be married, though what there is is often surprisingly perceptive; but a husband who perceived himself to be henpecked would find only mockery of his situation in these books – the case of Socrates's treatment at the hands of his wife Xanthippe was an endless source of entertainment – and little of practical help in managing his life.¹⁶

On those aspects of family relationships covered in this thesis, the didactic and polemical literature is patchy. There is almost nothing on sibling relationships, and surprisingly little on the responsibilities of adult children for their elderly parents. There is interminable advice on choosing a wife, rather less on choosing a husband, and general agreement that widows were to be avoided. Since I shall argue that remarriage has more moral problems associated with it than

¹⁵ Stephen Collins, *Step-Parents and Their Children* (London: Souvenir Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Xanthippe is described as the “curst and shrewd” prototype of Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, I.ii.70. The situation of ineffective men married to competent women is discussed in passing in the next chapter.

first marriages because it often involves children, the sparseness and frivolity of the treatment of the subject is emblematic of the shortcomings of this material, which contains little more than routine hostility towards stepmothers and effectively ignores stepfathers. How parents should treat small children has tangential importance for this study in the supposed consequences of wetnursing, and this does get extensive coverage in the literature, albeit of a repetitious and conventional nature, but otherwise the main topic of advice is the discipline and punishment of children which are outside the scope of this study, and mostly, it has to be said, distasteful to its spirit.

It's hardly to be expected that all dramatic situations will be covered by formal instruction or advice: Isabella's dilemma or a sister's incest with her brother were not going to be resolved by explicit codes of morality. It would, therefore, be helpful in understanding the plays if we could gain some sense of what was "normal" in the everyday counterparts of the imaginary lives on stage. What, in short, was the reality behind the drama? If brother-sister incest was usual, if early modern England was awash with homeless old men and girls blackmailed into sleeping with judges, the reception of the plays by early audiences plays would be different than if such eventualities were uncommon. The one area of life discussed in this study about which we have solid information is remarriage, and we know more than enough to put in perspective the alleged perils of marrying a widow of which the didactic and polemical books are relentlessly full. There are lots of widows in plays of the period, occasionally sinister but more often absurd, elderly, over-sexed, gratified at being pursued by gold-digging young men, and heartlessly pretending grief at the loss of their late husband or husbands. Widowers, by contrast, though frequent in plays, are not usually identified as such, so that, for example, nothing is made in *King Lear* of the marital state of Lear or Gloucester. The obvious inference is that the randy old widows on stage had more to do with misogyny than the reality, which was that both widows and widowers were common in early modern England, and that they remarried with a frequency and a rapidity that make nonsense of the stereotype. A playgoer, therefore, holding the hand of the pretty young widow he had recently married, would know perfectly well that the stage widow was a stock figure, much like the traditional Vice that was given contemporary dramatic life as an Edmund or an Iago. The playgoer and his new wife could laugh at Gertrude as they might at a Braggart, another comic type not often encountered in daily life, and in Gertrude's case there was the additional fun of her being married to a drunk who, according to the well-informed ghost of his late brother, can't satisfy her in bed, particularly unfortunate for the highly-sexed woman of the

stereotype.¹⁷

The information that allows us to know the stage widow for what she was comes from documentary records of deaths and marriages, but such empirical evidence is not available for the other relationships with which this study is concerned. Brothers who don't get on are common in Shakespeare's plays, but there's no means of knowing how far this represented what was usual in the lives of his audiences, and nor is there much indication in the conduct books about how brothers were supposed to treat one another. An audience at *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* would know that brothers and sisters were not permitted to marry, as, indeed, "A man may not marry his grandmother". In this latter case we have enough demographic "hard" evidence to know that opportunities for women who were minded to marry their grandsons were few and far between, for the expectation of life in the period meant that few men of a marriageable age had surviving grandmothers. The same demographic information enables us to know, what could have been worked out anyway, that octogenarian men, particularly homeless ones, were sufficiently rare the period to make the subject of their treatment by their adult children more a matter of dramatic interest than a common problem. But apart from fragments of gossip which I discuss in Chapter 5 there's no evidence about the incidence of incestuous love in the period, so no means of knowing how shocking audiences might have found it, though it's possible to draw conclusions from how the subject was treated in general.

MORE ON TAXONOMY.

Earlier I described a play as a synthesis of plot, character, language, and ideas, a crude taxonomy, but adequate to demonstrate the problems of writing with any academic objectivity about plays. The characters in a play are for audiences often the very essence of a play: "Hamlet without the prince" has become a proverbial way of describing something pointless. What to make of Hamlet himself, however, has been the occasion of some controversy, though fortunately not one that needs to be pursued here, where what is important is the place of character analysis in the academic study of literature. This has a direct bearing on my methodology, though for early studies this was not a problem. Dr Johnson, for example, was a devout and strait-laced critic who found *Tom Jones* too bawdy to get on with, but nevertheless had a soft spot for Falstaff:

17 This revisionist reading of Gertrude gets more judicious treatment in due course: I am here making a methodological rather than a substantive point.

But Falstaff, unimitated, unimitatable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee? Thou compound of sense and vice; of sense which may be admired but not esteemed, of vice which may be despised but hardly detested. He is a thief and a glutton, a coward and a boaster, always ready to cheat the weak and prey upon the poor; to terrify the timorous and insult the defenceless. ... It must be observed that he is stained with no enormous or sanguinary crimes, so that his licentiousness is not so offensive but that it may be borne for his mirth.¹⁸

The response is entirely subjective. Falstaff, indeed, seems to have had a particular appeal for critics of a censorious bent, for Dover Wilson, who drew the line at Isabella, also took a tolerant line on “the succulent old sinner”. His comment, though, is in the context of an emerging debate, relevant to this study, about the nature of literary scholarship.¹⁹ He was taking issue with Stoll, who didn't find Falstaff particularly funny and had attempted to explain him historically as a clownish residue of late medieval drama, a symbol rather than a character.²⁰ Wilson and Stoll were on different sides of a major theoretical rift in British literary studies that is still unresolved. The two sides of this debate tended to style themselves respectively as scholarship and criticism, or variants of these terms. Wilson's response to Falstaff and the plays in which he appeared was that of a well-read Englishman in the early twentieth century who saw himself as a critic. Stoll was interested in Falstaff and the plays as the creations of a specific historical time and thought that it was the understanding of how they came to be written that was important, not whether Falstaff could make a modern audience laugh. Wilson's testy remarks about Stoll turned out to be an early skirmish in a debate that by mid-century had become really nasty when a difference in approach became sharply controversial by the translation into English of an arrogantly provocative book by Levin Ludwig Schücking (1878-1964).²¹ The arrogance lay in the effective dismissal of everything that had previously been written about Shakespeare as anachronistically subjective, nothing more than a record of the personal responses of the author. This, went the argument, distorted the playwright's original meaning by imposing on it interpretations made in ignorance of the society and genres in which the plays were written, and in the case of Shakespeare, criticism from the romantic period onwards had found subtleties and complexities which were simply not there. The half-educated grammar school boy who cobbled the plays

18 Samuel Johnson, *Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. by William K. Wimsatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 117f.

19 John Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1943)., 1.

20 Elmer Edgar Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies, Historical and Comparative in Method* (New York, 1942).

21 Levin Ludwig Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays : A Guide to the Better Understanding of the Dramatist* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922). Many of the ideas in the book had been around for some time, though the provocativeness was new.

together was quite incapable of achieving the artistic effects later readers attributed to him.

Shakespearean scholarship has been prone to acrimony from early on. Lewis Theobald (1688 – 1744) showed a lack of proper respect for Pope's edition of Shakespeare and found himself starring in *The Dunciad*, which, as Johnson observed, gave him immortality of a sort.²² Johnson himself deprecated the ill-nature of some of his fellow editors who used language that was stronger than necessary in correcting mistakes in what he insisted were “subjects . . . of very small importance; they involve neither property nor liberty, nor favour the interest of sect or party”; but though professing an inability to understand “the acrimony of a scholiast”, the harshness of Johnson's own language brings images of pots and kettles to mind.²³ Schücking, therefore, must have known what he was getting into, or if he didn't he soon found out. To the obvious question of why is it more important to get back to some “original” meaning than to enjoy the experience of the play as it is encountered today, Schücking's answer was that there was not all that much to enjoy. Early modern drama was less sophisticated than had been supposed, so that, for example, trying to read anything into the structures of Shakespeare's plays was pointless because there were no structures, merely a lot of episodes strung together. Similarly, looking for intelligent symbolism in the design of a play wasn't going to get anywhere because the plays comprised a series of ready-made incidents dictated not by the creative mind of the dramatist, but by what he had available, so that the severed head that commentators had made so much of in *Cymbeline* was merely one left over from *Macbeth* which Shakespeare had found in the props basket. What was needed, continued Schücking as he warmed to his theme, was a return to the realities of thought and practice of the early modern theatre:

An historical understanding of Shakespeare is to be reached only by taking him much more literally than we have been wont to do, his art as more naïve, his methods as frequently far more primitive.

Character above all was likely to be misunderstood, because there was in fact no subtlety of characterisation in Shakespeare who delineated characters by “direct self-explanation”. When, for example, Caesar says “I am as constant as the northern star”, it means that he is firm of mind and

22 “Theobald, thus weak and ignorant, thus mean and faithless, thus petulant and ostentatious, by the good luck of having Pope for his enemy, has escaped alone, with reputation, from this undertaking”. *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, 85.

23 *Ibid.* p. 89.

purpose and nothing more, and when he continues to go on about his constancy it is just to drive home how resolute he is in case the slow-witted audience had missed it. Modern interpretations of this repetition as indicating an underlying lack of confidence simply miss the point by over-estimating the capacities of these audiences, though Schücking's own intellectual prowess momentarily slumbered causing him to miss that the idea that protesting too much might indeed express misgivings about what is being insisted upon comes from *Hamlet*. Caesar had to repeat himself to ensure there was no misunderstanding, and Shakespeare often had characters offer complementary explanations of other characters, and these too are to be taken at face value. Speculating about why one character says something about another instead of simply accepting it will lead to a

gross misunderstanding of Shakespeare's art-form which characterises all Shakespearean criticism of the last hundred years.

One wonders whether Schücking had ever actually seen a Shakespeare play on stage.

Schücking's robust philistinism lives on only as an historical curiosity, but the thrust of his argument, that any opinions about the characters in early modern drama were bound to be subjective, retains its force. His solution was not to attempt it, but to engage in a version of scholarship, that of getting back to original contexts and meanings and disregarding interpretations, other than descriptive ones, based on such an approach. It was this rejection of approaching literature from an aesthetic perspective that had fur flying in the mid-twentieth century.

The issue can be summed up by the case of Shakespeare's sonnets. Put simply, does it matter who Mr W. H., or the dark lady, or the rival poet, or the handsome youth, were? A. L. Rowse, for one, thought it did, so he worked out, to his own satisfaction, the identity of the dark lady, and broke off lifelong friendships with people who demurred (we shall encounter Rowse again later in this thesis).²⁴ If such facts are thought to be important, it follows that the study of literature is a process of rummaging in the archives to locate a literary text in its historical moment in order to

24 Richard Ollard, *A Man of Contradictions: A Life of A.L. Rowse* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 243 – 249; the successful candidate for dark lady was Aemilia Lanier, née Bassano: A. L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved: A Modern Edition with Prose Versions, Introduction and Notes*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1973).

understand it. One fruitful result of such rummaging began with the still indispensable work of E. K. Chambers and means that we know a lot about the material conditions in which early modern plays were performed.²⁵ A particularly assiduous scholar in this tradition was C. Walter Hodges whose charmingly fussy drawings gave life to the constraints and challenges with which playwrights of the period had to work.²⁶ We also know enough about theatre personalities, especially actors, to allow glimpses of how actor and playwright inspired one another, all of which mean that it's now less easy to see these plays as timeless celebrations of the human spirit.²⁷ Scholarship tends to shade into special pleading when producing biography, but the real possibility that Shakespeare was in life a thoroughly nasty piece of work makes it easier to recognise the cruelty present in even the most ostensibly genial of his comedies.²⁸ In opposition to such an approach is an extreme form of criticism which, in the case of Shakespeare, ignores the preoccupations of Rowse and his associates and simply luxuriates in the beauties of this sequence of poems.

Tempers started to fray when criticism's hegemonic control of English in British universities was confronted with a growing demand to go beyond the simple enjoyment of words on a page. Arthur Quiller-Couch was appointed to the regius chair in English at Cambridge in 1912, and in his published lectures make clear his contempt for the whole business (while continuing to pocket the remuneration and swank about the title). After sneering at length at the syllabus he was employed to teach, he argued that what undergraduates should be doing is encouraging the “spark” with which they responded to art: the task was

To nurse that spark, ... to fan, to draw up to a flame, ... to recognise that it is divine, yet frail tender, sometimes easily tired, easily quenched under piles of book learning ...²⁹

25 E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).

26 He was a prolific writer and illustrator; see, for example, C. Walter Hodges, *Shakespeare's Theatre. Written and Illustrated by C. W. Hodges*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

27 Bart Van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

28 His behaviour towards his wife is castigated in Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), *passim*; Professor Greer has earned our respect if for nothing else than for making such a prodigious number of bricks with so little straw. Shakespeare's shortcomings are catalogued in Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001). Duncan-Jones objects to the company he kept, his enthusiasm for money, and the irregularity of his sex life; these are all relative matters, and I was not persuaded by her indictment, which seemed to be an assemblage of pieces written for other purposes and opportunistically brought together. This is not to say that there is any reason to suppose that Shakespeare was a nice man, only that his nastiness was of the sort that often goes with his level of creativity.

29 Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Reading*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 33. The lecture from which this comes was delivered on 25.x.1916, with two years of war still ahead. Kenneth Graham said that that Quiller-Couch was the original of Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*.

This was pretty much what Schücking was castigating, and there was never going to be any meeting of minds between his associates and those of Quiller-Couch. One side scorned “piles of book learning”, the other derided readers who couldn't see Shakespeare and “his art as more naïve” than their adulation allowed. But as Wilson's admiration for Falstaff and his acerbic tone with Stoll illustrate, matters in the world of academic English had started to fester. Much of the toxicity was, inevitably, trivial in origin, the result of people working together and not getting on, or getting on at first and then falling out: clever people aren't necessarily any better than anyone else at managing relationships. There was, however, an important reality in the different positions set out by Schücking and Quiller-Couch. A generation later this was the basis of a harsh and lengthy controversy between F. R. Leavis who was emphatic that the business of literary scholarship was “judgement”, and F. W. Bateson advocating a version of scholarship which sought for the meaning of a text in when it was written not in the response of a modern reader. The bickering broke out in the late 'thirties, and flared up again in the early 'fifties.³⁰ To many onlookers at the time, and from a modern perspective, the whole business was absurdly out of proportion, and there were, and are, plenty of scholar critics, notably Bateson himself, who successfully resolved the supposed incompatibility of the two approaches.

The argument between scholarship and criticism eventually fizzled out, so my purpose in describing this obsolete controversy is to find a location for the methodology of this study. My project clearly belongs in the school, if not the spirit, of Schücking in that its focus is on when the plays were written and what they meant at the time not later. As to the merits of the two traditions, this thesis takes a conciliatory position, and its author has no interest in correcting error, being of the opinion that in the field of early modern drama, and, indeed, of all the arts, there is plenty of room for everyone. If someone chooses to believe that Shakespeare's plays were in fact written by Francis Bacon or, as Freud thought, by the Earl of Oxford, there will be lots of people to agree, and in the capacious world of ideas these beliefs are harmless enough (unless, of course, it is proposed to urge them on me). Unfortunately such a spirit of tolerance is still not everywhere abroad in the academic study of literature.

30 This unlovely debate can be followed in two anthologies. Round One, from the mid-nineteen thirties is in *The Importance of 'Scrutiny': Selections from 'Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review', 1932-1948*, ed. by Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 12 – 22; Round Two, from the early fifties, is preserved in *A Selection from 'Scrutiny'*, ed. by F. R. Leavis (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 280 – 316. It's a depressing aspect of the matter that Leavis edited this second volume when well into his seventies, apparently unable to let things rest even then: it might be thought “not hard”, as Capulet put it, “For men so old as we to keep the peace”.

A regrouping occurred in the nineteen seventies with the start of the long ascendancy of literary “theory” which is generally agreed to have started with a colloquium at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 attended by Derrida, Barthes, and Lacan. Also present was Paul de Man whose base at Yale became the launching place for deconstructionism and the assault on the very idea of meaning, the popularity of which was unshaken by the revelation that de Man had not so much feet of clay as an active past in German national socialism. At this point the labels changed, and the standoff, regrettably an accurate metaphor, was redefined as being between “constructivists”, the heirs of Schücking, who saw literature as “inscribed” by the social and cultural conditions in which it was produced, and “essentialists” who subscribed to Jonson's (probably sarcastic) encomium on Shakespeare as “not for an age but for all time”. The occasional well-meaning attempts to bridge the two positions or to make them go away attracted little interest, no doubt in part because the controversy was entirely confined to university departments, so careers thrived on it and there were strong motives to keep it alive.³¹ Constructivism was a broad church, sharing only a disapproval of “liberal humanism” to bind insights from what had become known as the human sciences, mainly anthropology, linguistics and some versions of psychology, which because these disciplines had some claim to scientific status, promised an end to subjectivity. Psychoanalysis, an important component in theory, of course predated Schücking's ill-mannered intervention, though it found a new creativity among its later coadjutants. So, for example, the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* was never easy to understand except as an act of gratuitous and, on the face of it, pointless cruelty, but all became clear when Rudnytsky explained that blinding is castration.³² Gloucester's eyeballs represent his testes, the bleeding sockets are vaginas, and the “dark and vicious place” was not, as had been credulously thought, an adulterous bed, but the transfigured eyesocket: all perfectly true, no doubt, for all that the anatomy is obscure and the suggestions indelicate, though, obviously, none of this would have occurred to audiences in early modern England, for the concepts used by Rudnytsky were not available.³³ The relevance to this study of such an approach, however, needs

31 One intellectually successful attempt at conciliation was Marcus Nordlund, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Love : Literature, Culture, Evolution* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), “a bio-cultural fusion of evolutionary and cultural/historical explanation” (p. 5). This took an eclectic approach to a subject that was perhaps the most divisive of all, either a universal human experience which even extended to non-human animals, or a social construct for the subjugation of women.

32 Peter L. Rudnytsky, “‘The Darke and Vicious Place’: The Dread of the Vagina in *King Lear*”, *Modern Philology*, 96 (1999), 291–311.

33 Not only conceptually but etymologically early modern audiences might have been at a loss. The usual term for testicles was “stones”, and sometimes “cods”, while “socket”, meaning the vagina, came into usage much later than the writing of *Lear*: Williams, I, 61ff; “balls” as a term for nonsense seems to have been a C20 coinage: OED, definition 2. It is clear from his other publications that Professor Rudnytsky is a distinguished scholar, and, to quote from *Timon* (II.ii.119), “not altogether a fool”, so this particular example of his work should not be held against

consideration

Clearing up the mystery of why Gloucester's eyes were put out emerged from the psychoanalytic insights that thrived for much of the twentieth century. Freud himself dabbled in literary analysis and looked with favour on the efforts of his disciples, so the productivity of this explanatory process is undeniable.³⁴ This is especially the case with thinking about dramatic character and motivation. In discussing Caius Martius, soon to be Coriolanus, for example, a modern editor observed that what is fascinating about him is his not strengths but his weaknesses, to understand which

... the most useful paradigm amalgamates Freud's discussions on narcissism, Object relations theory, and Lacan's more recent linguistic refinements of Freud.³⁵

The word "most" is incautious (an indefinite article would have raised fewer eyebrows), for it relegates without explanation the possibilities of making sense of Martius/Coriolanus in other ways, including those present in the play itself. More importantly, for this study, the whole approach is anachronistic, for all its unquestioned capacities to give meaning to what is otherwise mysterious. Hamlet, for example, has generally been found to be an enigmatic hero, until, that is, Ernest Jones realised that the Prince was the victim of an Oedipus Complex, a diagnosis he was to repeat rather frequently, albeit with occasionally comic results.³⁶ There is, of course, no denying that Hamlet may indeed have been thus afflicted, but the possibility can be ignored for purposes of this dissertation because nobody in early modern England knew about it if he was. Proponents of psychoanalysis would argue that our unawareness of what is troubling us is why we suffer, so by this argument early modern audiences might not have been able to put a name to what was the matter with Hamlet, but would understand it because without knowing it they drew on a body of universal meaning that lay below the reach of the waking mind.

him.

34 Sigmund Freud, "The theme of the three caskets" in *Collected Papers Vol. 4 Papers on Metapsychology ; Papers on Applied Psycho-Analysis/ Authorized Translation under the Supervision of Joan Riviere* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1925), 244 - 256.

35 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. by R. B. Parker, (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 55. This is a competent and scholarly edition, and the editor was probably just making a gesture to fashion in this curious and, it must be said, thoroughly obscure section.

36 A representative example is Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1976). When rehearsing for Hamlet, Laurence Olivier consulted Ernest Jones who persuaded him that The Prince had an Oedipus complex: Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 79. The result was that the closet scene of Olivier's film bordered on farce as Gertrude was pursued around her bed by her erethistic son.

Shakespeare, therefore, may not have been intentionally referring to the Oedipus myth when crafting the play, but it nevertheless shaped his imagination and provided its energy. This seems as good an example of a circular argument as one is likely to find, so I shall pursue it no further.³⁷

There is a well-known epistemological impasse that can be used both to discredit and to endorse psychoanalysis.³⁸ The explanatory versatility of the ideas of Freud and his successors is such that there's almost nothing they can't handle, which provides constant evidence of their validity to their adepts. But a theory that can explain entirely different pieces of behaviour in the same way is open to the charge of being a portmanteau concept, like original sin, that explains everything but might not exist. It's up to the individual to accept or reject the idea that the blinding of Gloucester was actually emasculation, but there can be no proof.³⁹ The promise of objectivity in understanding dramatic characters remains unfulfilled for anyone unable to accept the tenets of psychoanalysis, much as the explanatory power of the idea of original sin depends on an eschatological faith that is no longer universal. Nor has there been any generally accepted breakthrough in understanding dramatic characters by recourse to “modern” theories of the mind, those deriving from empirical psychology, however scientifically rigorous.⁴⁰

Literary theory seems to have gone out of fashion as suddenly as it came in.⁴¹ Sutherland, a shrewd observer of the profession of literature of which he has been a successful member

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- 37 This line of thought is persuasively developed in J. I. M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare: Some Recent Appraisals Examined* (Brooklyn: Haskell House, 1977); I hesitate to disagree with Stewart, a distinguished critic and an accomplished novelist, mostly under the pseudonym Michael Innes, but he seems to be conflating the recognition that there are “dark” sides to people's mental and emotional experiences, including their aesthetic ones, with the belief that these are actually comprehensible. But a belief that there is evil at loose in the world does the job of explaining these mysteries just as well.
- 38 Collins, Stephen, ‘Freud and “the Riddle of Suggestion”’, *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*. 7 (1980): 429–437 was a callow contribution to the discussion about Freudian epistemology.
- 39 The willingness of psychologist and psychiatrists to enlighten the rest of us about the theatre is more prevalent than successful. The most perceptive excursus I know by a clinician is Henry Yellowlees, *To Define True Madness*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), though he uses dramatic characters to illustrate medical condition rather than to explain the characters in medical terms. This latter approach is taken by Derek Russell Davis, *Scenes of Madness: A Psychiatrist at the Theatre* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995) of which the title is self explanatory. Theodore Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) is a scholarly exercise in psychoanalytic explanation impaired by a blindness to irony. Gregg Kreutz, *Bottoms Up!* (New York ; London: French, 1990) has the merit of not taking itself too seriously, and is spasmodically perceptive. The most successful professional psychologist to write literary criticism was D. W. Harding (1906 – 1993) who started as the in-house psychologist in *Scrutiny* and continued to produce insightful work alongside a distinguished career as a social psychologist: D. W. Harding, *Experience into Words* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); it's to be regretted, therefore, that he wrote little about drama.
- 40 The 2014 National Theatre version of *King Lear* was based on a clinical diagnosis of Lear as suffering from a known psychiatric syndrome and playing the character in keeping with the symptoms of the conditions. This required a measure of tinkering with the texts, and I have seen several productions I thought better.
- 41 My impression is supported by the annual review of the year's work in the last few editions of *The Shakespeare Survey*.

predicted that this would happen because fashions in academic literature seem to go in forty year cycles.⁴² That itself would not be an adequate reason for sidestepping nearly everything that emerged from it, for much of it has permanent value, especially the importance of gender in thinking about the past. But the ideas and methods were not around in early modern England, and as with psychoanalysis, anachronism is unavoidable if we bring modern ways of thinking to bear on thinking in the past.

READING THE PLOT.

Character, then, so essential to drama, remains, it seems, obdurately subjective. Edgar from *King Lear*, for instance, is a character who has usually been thought well of. Granville-Barker saw him as

... a man of character, indeed, modest, of a discerning mind, and, in this pagan play, a very Christian gentleman.⁴³

Peers, in his attractive little book about “mad folk” on the Elizabethan stage, is equally positive:

Edgar is Shakespeare at his best and truest ... we may even say that he stands for Truth itself. ... [There are] characteristics of the man which endear him to the most hostile spectator.⁴⁴

Though, actually, it turns out there are not, for, against strong competition, Edgar is “The most lethal character in the play”, according to Goldberg, and Cavell was equally unpersuaded: “Edgar's capacity for cruelty” is “the same cruelty as that of the evil characters”.⁴⁵ There are, naturally, plenty of more balanced assessments, but the range of opinions is striking, and a similar lack of unanimity is common with Shakespeare's characters.⁴⁶

42 John Sutherland and Stephen Fender, *Love, Sex, Death & Words: Surprising Tales from a Year in Literature* (London: Icon, 2011), 400. Sutherland made the same point at a lecture at York in 2014.

43 Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare. 2 King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra* (London: Batsford, 1970), 67; first published in 1930.

44 Edgar Allison Peers, *Elizabethan Drama and Its Mad Folk. Harness Prize Essay, 1913* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd, 1914), 173

45 S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 121; Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 283.

46 See, for example, Harry Berger, Jr, “Text against performance: the Gloucester family romance” in *Shakespeare's 'Rough Magic': Renaissance Essays in Honor of C.L. Barber*, ed. by Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985).

The prudent course to adopt in the face of this uncertainty is to avoid as far as possible the discussion of character, and this I have tried to do, though it will be clear at several stages in the argument that some reference to it is inescapable. To confuse the issue further, character analysis and its associated moral agency seem to be back into fashion, though talk of them has never, of course, been missing in conversations in theatre bars.⁴⁷ More objectivity and hence academic distance is possible with the other components of a play, plot, language, and ideas. Plots are there to be discussed, and all the information is available even though a five act poetic drama is not a novel, and has no omniscient narrator to describe and explain what happens. E. M. Forster argued that “The king died and then the queen died” is a story, but “The king died and then the queen died of grief” is a plot.⁴⁸ The difference is in the explanatory link between events, or as Dr Johnson showed when comparing the work of Richardson, which he admired, with that of Fielding, which he didn't, between a man who knew how a watch was made and one who could only “tell the hour by looking on the dial plate”.⁴⁹ A novelist can explain why the hands on the dial come to be where they are, the playwright is confined to showing them, with the result that a theatre audience can see the sequence of events, but has to work out for itself the connections between them. When, for example, Macbeth kills the grooms immediately after the discovery of the murder of Duncan and then expresses regret for doing it, Macduff asks:

Wherefore did you so?

Macbeth's response is non-committal, but “Wherefore”, according to Forster's formulation, introduces causality, the essence of plot, and leads on to why the grooms would want to kill Duncan, a question raised in the next scene when Macduff suggests that they were suborned by Duncan's sons, whose abrupt departure raises suspicions against them (*Macbeth*, II.iii.107). The audience knows who killed Duncan, that the grooms were smeared with blood by Macbeth's Lady in order to frame them, and that Duncan's death is not unwelcome to his sons. What it doesn't know for certain is why the grooms were killed. Unlike in a novel there is no authoritative explanation available, but the minor puzzle of Macbeth's motives has the effect of adding to the complexity of his character. We know that he liked killing people: this much was evident from the carnage he was involved in before he even appears on stage. But his wife tells us that he is “too

47 Michael D. Bristol, ed., *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (London: Continuum, 2010), *passim*.

48 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 93.

49 James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 367.

full of the milk of human kindness”, and he needs a lot of persuasion before he gets round to killing the king, something he instantly regrets as he *says* he regrets killing the grooms. Henry James would give us three incomparable paragraphs of explanation at this point, Shakespeare's audience has to do the best it can with what it sees and with what a character tells it and tother characters in the hearing of the audience. Only when there is a chorus is a disinterested explanation available, otherwise the gratifying indeterminacy of drama remains part of its appeal, though admittedly a comparable effect can be partially achieved by a first person narrator in a novel, but, at least before the early twentieth century, nothing like these narrative complexities of drama was possible in fiction.⁵⁰

Macduff is Macbeth's nemesis, so anyone in the audience who knew what was going to happen will have perceived that he was already starting to become suspicious. This introduces an important variable with dramatic plots, for when an audience knows the outcome it will behave differently from one sitting on the edge of its seat waiting to know what's going to happen next. The Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* makes clear how it's all going to end, leaving the audience free to concentrate on the process rather than the outcome. The audience knows who killed Duncan, and probably how it's all going to end for Macbeth in order for Shakespeare to find another use for the severed head that was so popular with audiences at The Globe. It's therefore free to concentrate on the dynamics of character, plot, and language, without distraction from awaiting outcome. There's no need to wonder who is going to kill Macbeth, but we do need to experience how at the start of the play he and the audience share full knowledge about what's going on, but as the action develops Macbeth knows ever less than the audience until he finally realises how badly he has misunderstood the witches.

Plot, therefore, is steadier than character as something to analyse, for all that it links up with character in questions of motivation, and this brings me back to the problem of subjectivity. I shall suggest that in a number of plays plot can be detached from subjectivity when we know the source of a play and by comparing the two can make out what values influenced its adaptation, as in the cases of *Isabella* and *Juliet*.

LANGUAGE.

50 Nabakov perfected the first-person narrator who couldn't be believed and whose identity was not always clear.

Language is more promising material for objective analysis. Apart from specialist exceptions like dumb shows and mime (and the late plays of Beckett) it is essential to drama and at a number of points I offer interpretations based on detailed readings of language. Much of the language of these plays, though, is in verse. Many plays surviving from antiquity were also in verse, so when secular drama got under way it was natural to follow this tradition, with the additional incentive that verse is easier to remember than prose, so its use was theatrically convenient, an important consideration when an actor might be appearing in several plays in the same week. But even if the convention of writing plays in verse was for essentially conservative and pragmatic reasons, the results were spectacularly out of proportion to their mundane genesis. By the late sixteenth century Elizabethan drama was maturing in a form which was nourished by the growing flexibility and power of expression of English verse. High standards of craftsmanship had become widespread. Spenser wrote no plays but he could make words do pretty much anything he wanted them to in several of the most demanding verse forms, and other writers learned from him. At the same period the fashion for writing sonnets provided useful practice in getting the better of words, with the result that even writers to whom the muse was a stranger could knock out thoroughly competent verse.⁵¹ In drama, parodying another playwright was often nasty, but, again, it enhanced the parodist's skills, made the victim think about mending his poetic ways, and, most importantly, educated audiences in appreciating stylistic nuances and characteristics.⁵² To augment these technical skills the vocabulary was growing fast at the time when Shakespeare was starting to write: in a single stanza of *The Faerie Queene* eight words were used for the first time or were given new meanings, and Shakespeare himself was an inveterate minter of words.⁵³

Poetry can say things that cannot be accurately paraphrased, and it was therefore becoming possible to say things in verse that were more complex than could be managed in prose.⁵⁴ This flowering of language and talent consequently provided a matchless aesthetic yield, but in the process shifted the concept of meaning beyond any one-to-one correspondence of text and interpretation. The reader who has lost interest in the identity of Mr W. H. and the dark lady, therefore, may have achieved one liberation but has not escaped the more rewarding difficulties

51 An example of a sonnet sequence written without the benefit of inspiration is Barnabe Barnes, *Parthenophil and Parthenophe. A Critical Edition*, ed. by Victor A. Doyno (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971); I got as far as Sonnet 51 out of 102 (plus others not belonging to the sequence): such diligence should not go unrecorded.

52 Jonson's parodies of Marston are particularly perceptive and unkind, but the two patched things up and went on to collaborate.

53 W. F. Bolton, *A Short History of Literary English* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), 21 – 2; the stanza is II.vii.10.

54 Lyly's euphuistic prose is an exception to this generalisation. Its verbal patternings had a potential for sustained oxymoron, though the disappointing fact is that Lyly hadn't actually much to say.

in understanding the poems themselves. These difficulties are in part because the requirements of metrical verse demand syntactical compromises which can make it hard to construe the text, but there are also more mundane factors at work, for almost any early text is likely to be corrupt. Thus the account of the death of Falstaff in *Henry V* includes one of the most beautiful sentences in Shakespeare:

For his nose was as sharp as a pen and a babbled of green fields. (II.iii.15)

But every schoolchild knows that this was written not by Shakespeare but, partly at least, by an eighteenth century editor.⁵⁵ It's an approximation based on a text of the play put out in 1600 and usually written off as a "bad" quarto, and on the version in the first folio edition of the plays published in 1623, which is thought to have been printed from Shakespeare's own manuscript.⁵⁶ If this was indeed the case, the compositor, a notoriously slapdash fellow, was working from a manuscript which was over twenty years old, probably with shopping lists scribbled in the margins, and in places illegible because secretary hand had an inbuilt capacity to be misread even when not heavily blotted by an overinked quill. It was written on an unbound sheaf of papers which had been lying around in the tiring house when not in someone's pocket in ordinary or brothel.

"As a pen" is a simile, though what is being likened to what is unclear because of the state of the text, and simile and metaphor are as essential to language as words. Figurative language can both clarify and obfuscate, so that the description of the death of Falstaff might be read as a metaphor for the passing of Hal's irresponsible youth, the new order cleansed by the ebbing tide washing away its memories, or it might be nothing of the sort, merely a device for once and for all getting rid of a character who had become a bore. Again, "Falstaff" might be, probably is, a wordplay signifying erectile dysfunction, an example of the less than elevated way in which words alone can open metaphorical dimensions, as well as of the loading a single word can be made to bear, and of how an unwary association like "elevated" can be both embarrassing and enlightening. Early modern playwrights had trained in rhetoric, and all the innumerable figures of speech were familiar to them, and though as often as not these devices are little more than ornament, they can on occasions enrich the meaning and examples of this will recur in later

55 Theobald, so despised by Johnson and unkindly satirised by Pope.

56 The 1623 Folio reads "and a Table of greene fields", which is puzzling, though there are plenty of explanations available.

discussions. The joke of Falstaff's name, if such it is, belongs with countless instances of what has become known as "bawdy", as often as not serving no more purpose than such talk always does, but which I shall argue in connection with *Romeo and Juliet* makes an essential contribution to the plot, the dirty jokes acting as a form of communication in their own right.

There is no point at this stage of belabouring the endless resources of the language or of how it can add layers of meaning to the interactions of characters within an unfolding narrative.⁵⁷ The fact that the language is often of great beauty is an added, welcome, complication. Putting ravishing poetry, for example, into the mouth of Caliban is unsettling, for the language given him destabilises perceptions of "this thing of darkness", an intending rapist and murderer, and opens up disconcerting lines of thought about good and evil in the isle that is full of voices. Prospero had taught Caliban language, but not only had he learned to curse but also to describe his dreams and a capacity for delight which leads to complex patterns of meaning that are beyond literal interpretation – and the beauty here is almost entirely descriptive, bare of metaphor and simile or other standard poetic devices. There is also a more general issue with this speech, which is that of how hard it is to do any sort of justice to a work of art with anything like academic objectivity. Attempts to explain humour mostly end in comic pomposity with nobody much the wiser, and trying to explain beauty is even more foolhardy. The paradox is that most people with an academic interest in works of art start from the recognition that the most important thing about them is that they are beautiful, not necessarily in the sense of being pretty or otherwise pleasing, but in their capacity to cause what Eliot called "the shudder", the physiological response that art is capable of producing.⁵⁸ If this is what is most important about a play, circling round without confronting its aesthetic qualities can be a sterile experience.

The wrenching of syntax caused by the artificial nature of verse together with its demands of rhythm and rime make difficulties for the reader, but there long prevailed a general belief that with enough experience and with the help of glossaries and notes all would eventually make sense. When it didn't, the blame could be put on an indolent or alcoholic typesetter, though this went with a disheartening suspicion that one's inability to understand something was because one

57 For a sensitive exploration of how a poetic device can open out meaning, see George T. Wright, 'Hendiadys and Hamlet', *PMLA*, 96.2 (1981), 168–93.

58 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1961), 222. Kermode, in an essay on Eliot, provided a scholarly tour-de-force in tracing the long recognition of this effect of art, more usually referred to as a *frisson*; he was too sensible to attempt to explain it, though sensitive in finding examples that caused it: Frank Kermode, 'Eliot and the Shudder', *London Review of Books*, 13 May 2010.

was obtuse. All this changed with the publication in 2000 of Frank Kermode's *Shakespeare's Language*.⁵⁹ This was a book aimed not at an academic readership, which he accused of being in thrall “to a new cliquish interest”, but at anyone with an interest in the theatre. At a stroke obtuseness and the printer were exonerated and optimism modified by the demonstration, accompanied by copious scholarship, that significant portions of what Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote was incomprehensible, not just to modern audiences but to original ones. These were made up of people who were “oral rather than literate, ... trained to listen and must have been rather good at following”, but would nevertheless get only the gist of a speech, and that some speeches were anyway fully intended to baffle the characters they are addressed to.⁶⁰ The congenial iconoclasm of the book was summed up in an article written to accompany its publication:

There are passages in *Coriolanus* that nobody now understands and even allowing for possible textual corruption it seems unlikely any body ever did.⁶¹

Shakespeare's writing life overlapped with that of Donne, and as the resources of English developed the language sometimes over-reached itself so that by the time of the great tragedies Shakespeare was working at a level of linguistic complexity beyond the comprehension of many of his contemporaries. Like much metaphysical poetry, therefore, it's possible to understand only in a general way not in detail. Early and middle period Shakespeare might “Warble his native wood-notes wild”, but by the turn of the century his language was starting to become denser to the point of obscurity.⁶²

A play's language can often be difficult to pin down, therefore, garbled in transmission, written using words of which the meanings were often unclear and changing, by poets of variable competence, and, in the case of Shakespeare, writing at the utter limit of thought and feeling. Despite all this, the convention is to pore over these plays as if every semi-colon had a special significance, and this study follows the convention. As with character and plot, dogmatism is foolish.

59 Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Allen Lane, 2000).

60 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

61 Kermode, Frank, ‘Writing about Shakespeare.’, *London Review of Books*, 9 December 1999, p. 8.

62 Milton, L'Allegro, l., 134, in John Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems [of] John Milton*: ed. John Carey (London: Longman, 1971), 143.

THE FAMILY.

Such, then, in outline are my methodology and its problems, but frequent references to family relationships have not acknowledged that here, too, there are issues of definition and meaning. There were two interconnected versions of the family in early modern England. The first was the family as a domestic unit, a household centred on a married couple which included servants and lodgers as well as the various children, in-laws, unmarried siblings and others linked by blood and affinity. The second version of family was conceptual. It depended not on where people lived but on who was recognised as belonging to the broadening circle of people connected to the immediate household by lines of kinship and affinity, of birth and marriage. The links here were based not on daily interactions, but on assumptions about common interests, and on shared experiences and histories. Most people lived in households which had these presumptive connections with other households and experienced family both tangibly in daily life and intangibly with a sense of belonging with people who were not present on a daily basis.

Families, however understood, are not static configurations of relationships, but units of rolling obsolescence, needing continual refashioning as children grow up, marry and move away, as parents grow old, and as people die. The death of a spouse may lead to a particularly dramatic reconfiguration of existing patterns of relationships on top of the regular adjustments needed as children arrive, grow, and grow up. The same metamorphoses are going on in the wider family, the network of relationships not based on residency, and as the intersecting circles broaden out, the strengths of family bonds diminish with distance, so that a cousin is likely to be more important than second cousins, and so on, until the bonds became attenuated into nothing.

The inbuilt ephemerality of family life was probably made worse in early modern England by migration. This was a society on the move, with wholesale shifts from country to town and from village to village. Rapidly growing urban areas must often have had the effect of weakening family ties because of distance and problems of communication. Did Shakespeare write home every week? There's no reason to think he was celibate in London, though reciprocal infidelity might have been more difficult for his wife in a small town with observant neighbours. Whether she knew, or cared, about her husband's activities in London is unknown, as is why he did not have his family with him in the capital. His children can barely have recognised him on his supposed annual visits, if indeed they were his children and not someone else's. These questions

posed by what little we know about the poet's life, however, are introduced only to illustrate both the disruptive potential of migration on domestic family life, and the fragility of conceptual long-distance relationships unless reinforced by physical contact.

CONCLUSION.

This study starts, therefore, from the recognition that family relationships have a moral dimension as well as the more conspicuous emotional and practical ones, and that this finds expression in early modern plays. Cordelia relied on moral functions like duty and gratitude, her sisters on love, thus laying out alternative modes for children to relate to their parents, and when the Lady in *Macbeth* is goading her husband she scoffs at him for

Letting I dare not wait upon I would, like the poor cat i'th'adage.⁶³ (I.viii.44)

The distinction here is between fear, an emotion, and “would”, a practical choice, and moral only in its intention to disregard conventional ideas of right and wrong. There is a syntactical similarity with the structure of Paul's castigation of his own weakness when he fails to do what he wishes to:

For I do not the good thing, which I wolde, but the evil, that I wolde not, that do I.⁶⁴

The Apostle lacks the Lady's humour, and the shared “would” contrasts Paul's intention to do good with Macbeth's intention to do bad, but both sentences challenge any sense of morality as a linear process of belief followed by action, for the connection between “would” and “do” is organic. Thought and feeling are not discrete entities, ideas can't always be detached from emotion, so that, for example, guilt is experienced emotionally but necessarily depends on beliefs about how one should behave. The fusion of thought and feeling is not complete even in this example, for guilt is divisible into a working distinction between remorse and regret, clearly brought out in *Measure for Measure*, in which the sincerity of Juliet's penitence is established as remorse, for she is sorry for what she and Claudio have done, not regret that they have been

63 She is identified in the 1623 Folio as “The Lady” or “Macbeth's Lady”, never as “Lady Macbeth”, so I shall refer to her throughout as “(the) Lady” at whatever cost of irritation to the reader.

64 *Romans*: VII: 19.

found out.⁶⁵

An audience, though, sits in judgement, so the moral question becomes whether what Juliet and Claudio have done is as bad as she thinks. There is abundant denunciation of fornication to be found in didactic and polemical writing of the period, including the occasional expression of regret that it was no longer a capital offence in early modern England, but the punishments meted out by church courts suggest that Jacobean audiences would not have regarded the anticipation of marriage by Claudio and his Juliet as all that heinous. In this case, therefore, “would” and “do” can be separated, and an audience can adjudicate on both, drawing on prevailing moral ideas for the purpose. The case of the other Claudio, Gertrude's new husband in *Hamlet*, involves a more total identification of morality and behaviour as he tries unsuccessfully to pray, trapped in the logic of being unable to put right what he has done and unable to repent it. Hamlet refrains from killing him at this point, wishing to send him to hell, unaware that Claudio is kneeling not praying. Claudio and Hamlet are both unable to do what they would, in the one case pray, in the other revenge, but the demands of this scene on the audience's moral lexicon is enormous, involving as it does issues of salvation and damnation, murder and revenge, and of how strictly ethical questions can become contaminated by sympathy for Claudio in his despair, and a distaste for Hamlet's wish to deprive his uncle of the spiritual opportunity allowed every condemned felon (though not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

None of the family dilemmas discussed in this dissertation is of anything like the complexity of Hamlet's hovering with his knife over his stepfather, and many of them are essentially comic though drawing on serious moral issues. What all of them involve, however, is a situation on stage in which the dramatic protagonists are subject to evaluation against moral standards available to early modern audiences. As we shall see, there is a measure of agreement among modern commentators that incest between brothers and sisters is at least defensible, but this is in a society with reliable contraception and an understanding of how such incest differs in kind from that between a father and his daughter. This latter form of incest occurs in *Pericles*, where it is not represented as the rape we should now see it as, and it's doubtful whether rape as an abuse of power would have made sense to early audiences. Wish and act and the discrepancy between them simply doesn't work in this case.

65 II.iii.18ff.

This chapter has been a series of prolepses as I have sought to address the difficulties in saying anything sensible about a work of art. The elements of a play, its characters, its plot, and its language work together to form the artistic whole, and all in their different ways elude objective assessment. The emphasis of this study, therefore, is intended to obviate at least some of these difficulties by limiting its scope to family relationships. The eschatological dimension of Hamlet and Claudio is not present in most of the dilemmas to be discussed, some of which are primarily comic even in their own terms. The emphasis on dilemmas, though, is important, for I take it for granted that morality is of little interest unless it informs choices, and the plays I shall discuss all involve dilemmas which are not simply utilitarian, as are those of Portia's suitors confronting the caskets. The dilemmas are not necessarily explicit, so there's not much actual discussion about the right way to treat elderly parents in *King Lear*, or about how siblings were supposed to behave in *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* though there's plenty of talk of remarriage and I shall argue that the Capulet parents could be indicted in the terms of discussions about the care of infants familiar to audiences.

The material comprising this study does not lend itself to the development of a sequential thesis, and this dissertation is instead a series of linked essays with some common themes running through them. There is an organising concept, that of natural affection, which surfaces in different forms in most chapters, but it is a slippery idea that eludes formal definition and understanding. It will become apparent that though families belong in some way with a natural order of things, what that means and how it matters are elusive. Nature does not intrude much on my opening discussion, which is about the place of obedience in domestic life. Anyone living in twenty-first century England with a working knowledge of the history of twentieth-century Europe is likely to be deeply suspicious of the supposed virtues of obedience, so it is an anachronistic pleasure to discover that the world of the early modern theatre was less committed to obedience than it was supposed to be.

CHAPTER TWO.

A CULTURE OF OBEDIENCE?

OBEDIENCE AND THE CATECHISM.

In the previous chapter I referred to “official” morality, a workable postulate in a society in which church and state were so closely integrated as almost to be one and the same. It does not follow that there was a systematic, codified set of rules covering every eventuality, and the piecemeal nature of moral instruction was acknowledged by an Essex clergyman, Richard Rogers (c1550 – 1618), in the preface to his guide to Protestant conduct:

And partly also I was moved hereunto by this reason, that the Papists cast in our teeth, that we have nothing set out for the certaine and daily direction of a Christian, when yet they have published (they say) many treatises of that argument. For answeare to the first poynt of this objection, they cannot deny (but that they care not what they say, to bring the people out of love with our religion) they cannot (I say) deny, that both in catechismes, sermons, and other treatises, there is set forth by us that which may cleerely direct Christians, and stir up godly devotion in them, though all be not gathered together in one volume: ...⁶⁶

According to Rogers, therefore, people knew what was expected of them despite the absence of a compendious moral guide because there existed well-established means of making known these expectations. This chapter sets out to identify the moral advice disseminated in the ways described by Rogers.

At the end of the eventful first scene of *King Lear* Goneril makes a surprising accusation to Cordelia:

You have obedience scanted,

And well are worth the want that you have wanted. (I.i.279)

⁶⁶ Richard Rogers, *Seaven Treatises Containing Such Direction as Is Gathered out of the Holie Scriptures ...* (London : for Thomas Man, 1605).

The heavily alliterated monosyllables of the wordplay in the second line conclude in a feminine ending and an assonance linking “wanted” with “scanted”.⁶⁷ The result is a dense sentence which is hard to construe and which has caused editors a lot of trouble. What is surprising about it, though, is that Cordelia has not been obviously disobedient and, indeed, obedience had been one of her claims to her father. Nor is it clear exactly what Goneril means she is lacking, for Cordelia has actually done rather well for herself as she is about to become a queen, though since there's no doubt that Goneril is being hostile rather than congratulating her sister on a brilliant marriage, there is a complex irony in “worth”. The protestations of love by the older sisters earlier in the scene had been couched in the language of commerce, including worth, so the sense of economic value, very high in a queen, is belied by the reiteration of “want” to mean lack of something caused by her scanting.

I suggested in the last chapter that honour for parents was a requirement, love for them more optional. Honour, however, is not a simple concept, though it clearly includes respect, so it was helpfully glossed by the authors of the Catechism which everyone had to learn as a child. Catechisms taught through question and answer, in the simpler version by set questions and set answers, which was not conducive to sophisticated teaching and understanding. It was a populous genre: Green has found 350 published in English in the century ending in 1646, and speculated that numerous manuscript ones have been lost.⁶⁸ Only two, however, had official endorsement, that of Alexander Nowell, which was approved by Convocation and was used, in Latin, in grammar schools, and the one in The Prayer Book which it was compulsory to master.⁶⁹ In this, after the Commandments had been rehearsed, the question was asked “What is thy dutie towards thy neighbour?” to which the reply was:

To love, honour, and succoure my father and mother. To honour and obey the kyng, and his ministers. To submitte myselfe to all my governours, teachers, spirituall pastours, and maisters. To ordre myselfe lowlye and reverently to all my betters.⁷⁰

67 This assumes modern pronunciation.

68 Ian Green, ‘For Children in Yeeres and Children in Understanding’: The Emergence of the English Catechism under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts’, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37, no. 3 (July 1986): 397–425. The subject gets fuller treatment in Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c.1530-1740*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

69 Alexander Nowell, *A Catechisme, or First Instruction and Learning of Christian Religion. Translated out of Latine into Englishe*. (London: Printed by Iohn Daye, 1570). This is the first English version of a book originally in Latin and reprinted with great frequency.

70 BCP, p. 61; the 1559 version is the same except for adjusted spelling and the substitution of “Quene” for “kyng”.

Any vagueness of meaning of honour has been removed by surreptitiously expanding it into a requirement of obedience to all authority, not just that of parents. The Commandment against covetousness gets similar treatment. The child is taught to interpret the avoidance of envy and greed as a requirement

to do my dutye in that state of life, into whiche it shal please God to cal me.⁷¹

Loving one's neighbours becomes part of shunning covetousness: prompted to enlarge on this duty, the child replies:

My dutye towardes my neyghbour is to love hym as myselfe: And to do to all men as I would they should do unto me. ... To beare no malice nor hatred in my harte. To kepe my handes from picking and stealyng, and my tongue from evil speakyng, liying and slaundryng.⁷²

There is no denying the intellectual resourcefulness by which two straightforward prohibitions from the Old Testament have been elided with the positive principles taught by Jesus in the New to produce a formula for a hierarchical social order. But, tendentious or not, the effect is to make obedience a generic term for good behaviour, which explains Goneril's jibe at Cordelia whose scanted obedience is not that she had failed to do what she was told, but that she had angered her father, which was, according to the teaching of the Catechism, tantamount to disobedience.

A modern reader aware of the atrocities committed in authoritarian societies is likely to be cautious about the wisdom of teaching children that deference is an absolute requirement. It's reassuring, and acceptably anachronistic, to find that there is plenty of evidence that early modern England wasn't in fact a society of routine obedience to unchallenged authority. So, for instance, though church courts seem on the whole to have been conducted with good sense and pragmatism in their efforts to uphold standards, their authority was not always accepted, and their records preserve the occasional episode of insubordination for the entertainment of future generations. Before a Warwickshire court in 1595 on a charge of brawling and abuse, for example, Elizabeth Wheeler expressed reservations about her judges:

71 BCP, p. 153.

72 BCP, p. 153; "Pickers and stealers" is the basis of one of Hamlet's unfathomable jokes: III.iii.336.

God's wounds, a plague of God on you all, a fart of one's arse for you.⁷³

Such recalcitrance was not uncommon.⁷⁴ In 1590 a court officer attempting to cite a woman found himself dealing with her brother, from Witham in Essex, who raised questions about the *bona fides* of the officer and his court:

Shit on your process. Your court is a bawdy court. I care not for you nor your court neither.⁷⁵

More common than open defiance was the problem of getting miscreants to appear at all, and many cases have no recorded outcome simply because the defendants repeatedly failed to turn up. The appellation “bawdy court” itself suggests a discrepancy between attempts at enforcement in matters of intimate morality and an acceptance of the right to do so.

These are, of course, isolated incidents that may well not reflect the prevalent attitude to authority, though they show that there were at least some dissidents prepared to annoy the upholders of public standards. More tangentially, though making a similar point that obedience must be earned when it cannot be imposed, is the setting of the Watch in *Much Ado about Nothing*, a comic episode which contains a serious insight. Dogberry instructs his “good men and true” that they “are to bid any man stand, in the prince's name”. But “How, if a' will not stand?” asks one of the Watch. Dogberry and Verges then have an instructive exchange:

Dogberry: Why, then, take no note of him, but let him go; ... and thank God you are rid of a knave.

Verges: If he will not stand when he is bidden, he is none of the prince's subjects.

Dogberry: True, and they are to meddle with none but the prince's subjects.⁷⁶ (III,iii,1)

The logic is intuitive rather than formal, and extends to taking no action against drunks who refuse to go home, thieves the Watch chances to meet, and nurses who neglect crying babies. The

73 E. R. C. Brinkworth, *Shakespeare and the Bawdy Court of Stratford*. (Chichester: Phillimore, 1972), 63.

74 F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life : Morals & the Church Courts*. (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1973), 307ff.

75 Emmison, 313.

76 This is probably the earliest statement of what was to become, and until recent years to remain, an essential principle of British policing: that it depended on the consent and goodwill of those who are being policed.

Watch is more interested in getting a good night's sleep than enforcing the law, but the scene nevertheless provides evidence of the existence of scepticism about the mechanisms of a stratified society, so it's an important document in the understanding of early modern society and the place of obedience in it.

OBEYING THE HUSBAND.

There was, it seems, no simple correspondence between the lessons of the Catechism and a general tractability. If “official” morality could be summarised as obedience, many of the children dutifully rehearsing the merits of subordination would later come to question what had been so painstakingly inculcated in them. But it was not only children who were supposed to do what they were told: there was a duty of obedience by wives. “Ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands” was the uncompromising admonition, a requirement that carried over into the marriage service in which women promised to obey.⁷⁷ There were good reasons for this obedience other than as an extended interpretation of the fifth Commandment, because women were “the weaker vessel” who would make a mess of things if left to their own devices.⁷⁸ The connection of all this with what actually went on again raises the question of how far this culture of deference had much basis in everyday reality. In one marriage at least things did not always go according to the prescription, an example which is poignant or diverting according to one's point of view. Arthur Throckmorton (c1557 – 1626) was married to Anna, neé Lucas.⁷⁹ He was a soldier, diplomat, courtier, scholar, justice of the peace, Deputy Lieutenant of his county, wealthy and well-connected (he was the brother-in-law of Walter Raleigh and brother of the woman who enjoyed the most celebrated orgasm of the sixteenth century).⁸⁰ None of this cut any ice at home, where Throckmorton was so terrified of his wife that he had periodically to seek refuge from her with neighbours.⁸¹ He records in his diary that his wife and her mother “spit venom”, how his wife “entra en furie avec moi”, that “ma femme renouvella sa colère en extrémité”, and how he suffers under the “continuation de la colère de ma femme”. It is apparent that not only had Anna

77 *I Peter*, III: 1.

78 *I Peter*, III: 7.

79 A. L. Rowse, *Raleigh and the Throckmortons*. (London: Macmillan, 1962).

80 John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, and Other Selected Writings*. (London: Cresset Press, 1949). Aubrey is not known for his reliability, but it would be good to think that in this case the story was true.

81 Rowse, p. 114; then, respectively, pp. 116, 276, 292. Rowse refers to the couple's “tiffs”, but he made a virtue of remaining unmarried and his vocabulary perhaps reflects this. A tiff is a discussion about whether we should or should not have turned left at the last roundabout, and if a mistake has indeed been made whether the responsibility is that of the driver or the person who is *supposed* to be navigating. Such disagreements do not usually end in one of the parties taking refuge with neighbours.

Throckmorton no intention of behaving herself, but was being egged on by her mother, whose responsibility was surely to bring her daughter to a better way of thinking.⁸² Obedience in this household did not, therefore, derive from prescribed status, but from personality. There was little that Arthur Throckmorton, writhing under his wife's thumb, could do except keep out of the way or give her money to get her to be quiet. (He might, in theory, have resorted to physical violence, though one suspects that this would not have been advisable). The couple had, however, available authoritative and unexpectedly undogmatic advice which might have helped them get on better. This came in *An Homily on the State of Matrimony*, published early in Elizabeth's reign.

HOMILIES.

Rogers identified homilies as one of the means by which morality could be taught. They had had their origin early in the Reformation, and derived from a work which consolidated agreed changes in doctrine and practice set out in what became known as *The King's Book*, so called because Henry had endorsed it, published in 1543 and written by a committee of bishops and theologians. Although primarily about matters of faith *The King's Book* had something to say about family relationships and their moral foundation, and together with its successor homilies provides insights into how the authorities in early modern England expected people to behave. It enlarged the Commandment on adultery to cover all sexual misbehaviour:

All manner of unlawful use of those parts which be ordained for generation, whether it be by adultery, fornication, incest, or any other mean.⁸³

This includes those who

Abuse themselves or any other personage against nature,

or made love when the wife was menstruating.⁸⁴ *The King's Book* went on to extend the scope of

82 The couple's handsome tomb in Paulespury, Northants, shows them recumbent, elbow to elbow, face to face, perhaps eyeball to eyeball. It is fully described in Nikolaus Pevsner and Bridget Cherry, *Northamptonshire, The Buildings of England*, 2nd ed (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 371: "A most unusual and slightly ludicrous monument. ... His is a decidedly humorous face".

83 *The King's Book, Or, A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man*, 1543, ed. by T. A. Lacey and Charles Lloyd, Church Historical Society (London: S.P.C.K., 1932), 111.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

the injunction to honour parents to include anybody in authority, which, as we have seen, made its way into the Catechism. By this interpretation, servants equated with children in the obligation to honour their masters and mistresses, and received some entitlement in return, for parents had a duty to care for their children (and their servants), to bring them up to righteousness, with a number of scriptural references to approve a measure of strictness in doing this. Any failure of parents to meet this obligation was displeasing to God, and *The King's Book* notes that disobedience to parents was in the past a capital offence, while acknowledging, with perhaps a trace of regret, that the times had changed.

Much of the contents of *The King's Book* was reused in the first book of Homilies, published in 1547 which were required to be read out in place of sermons by any clergyman who was considered insufficiently learned, theologically unreliable, or otherwise not to be trusted to preach. The original Homilies were replaced in Mary's reign but brought back on the accession of Elizabeth, when a second book was published. They were probably going out of use towards the end of the century, to be replaced by sermons which keen Protestants much preferred, and there is a reference to them in *As You Like It*:

O most gentle pulpiter! What tedious homily of love have you wearied your parishioners withal, and never cried, "Have patience, good people". (III.ii.163)

The speaker is Rosalind, responding to verses on her perfection, so the usage here is essentially metaphorical, but her remark nevertheless suggests that there was still some knowledge of the Homilies in Shakespeare's lifetime, and that not everyone thought much of them.

The authority of the Homilies was, in theory, considerable, with their basis in royal and ecclesiastical power, and should, again in theory, give access to the moral code of their originators who had the power to enforce what they wanted. They vary greatly in style and content, often heavy handed, but often demonstrating a, perhaps surprising, pastoral sensitivity. This is particularly in evidence in the three concerning salvation. This was achieved entirely by faith, without which even the most virtuous actions are spiritually pointless. What is apparently meritorious

be but shadowes and shewes of lively and good things, and not good and lively things indeed.... If a heathen man clothe the naked, feed the hungrie, and doe such other like works: yet because he doeth them not in faith, for the honour and love of God, they be but dead, vaine, and fruitless works to him.⁸⁵

So much for the good Samaritan. That salvation came from faith alone is demonstrated by the example of the penitent thief crucified alongside Jesus:

I can shew a man that by faith without works lived, and came to heaven: but without faith, never man had life. The thiefe that was hanged, when Christ suffered, did beleeve onely, and the most mercifull God justified him.⁸⁶

The implicit paradox is familiar enough, and the Homilist makes it clear that good behaviour is expected even if it will not of itself lead to salvation. He could hardly do otherwise. Henry VIII had initially demurred at the doctrine of predestination on the grounds that it was bad for discipline, and he had a point: why not devote your life to the pleasures of the flesh if how you behaved was irrelevant to your chances of salvation.⁸⁷ The Homilist gets off this hook with some style. Necessary behaviour by a Christian included obedience to civil authority and its laws, but there was an important distinction to be made between the laws of God and the sort of activities that had become accepted as required pieties in traditional Catholicism. Jesus had said that to come to everlasting life meant keeping the Commandments, *not* the laws of the Scribes and Pharisees, the modern equivalents of which were these superstitious rituals of unreformed religion. Unregenerate humanity has worshipped all manner of objects and creatures, pagan deities as well as the Devil in numerous guises, and the laws of the Scribes and Pharisees and Romish practices belonged with these wicked superstitions. Many of the acts of misplaced zeal that have been enjoined on the faithful over the centuries were the successors of such unscriptural laws. All the shrines, pilgrimages, veneration of images,

And all things which ... were called holy, holy coules, holy girdles, holy pardons, beades, holy

85 Ronald B. Bond, ed., *Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547). And, A Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570)* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1987).

86 *Ibid.*, p. 105; the penitent thief is not mentioned in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, in which Jesus's fellow victims join in the crowd's derision of Him.

87 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer : A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 212f..

shoes, holy rules, and all full of holiness

were “foolish”, “superstitious” and “ungodly”, merely human traditions, developed by sinners.⁸⁸ There was especial scorn for the three requirements of monastic life. Poverty was belied by the vast wealth of the religious orders, wealth now in secular hands, though the Homilist doesn't mention this. Obedience was not the new obedience of the Protestant Catechism, but a travesty, doing the bidding of religious superiors at the cost of obedience to king and parents to whom it was properly due. As for chastity, the less said about it the better:

And how their profession of chastity was kept, it is more honestly to passe over in silence, and let the world iudge of that which is well knowen, then with unchaste words, by expressing of their unchaste life, to offend chaste and godly eares.⁸⁹

So by separating out the ritualistic ceremonies of the unreformed Church, and making it plain that it is only these that are irrelevant to salvation, the Homilist establishes the importance of other forms of behaviour.

One can only admire the adroitness of this disposal of the implicit threat to discipline by detaching salvation from conduct, even if it won't stand too close a logical analysis, and a similar adroitness is shown in the treatment of the faith that is required for salvation. Here the Homilist elides faith with belief, so that faith is a comfortingly easy matter, what a person believes, not an intense spiritual condition bordering on the mystical. A simple agreement with what congregations recited every week in the Creeds, an acceptance of the Incarnation and the Atonement, of the idea that Christ died to save sinners, was enough. Cranmer probably thought that faith was actually a more strenuous thing than assent to a series of doctrines, but – assuming that he had a hand in writing these Homilies – he recognised that too much could not be asked of people.⁹⁰ The Church of England thrived well into the twentieth century on the basis of such an undemanding approach to the spiritual life.

This pastoral wisdom is not carried over into the first of two Homilies that deal with family

88 Bond ed., p. 110

89 Ibid., p. 111; this reticence would come to be regretted by frivolous generations in the future.

90 My understanding of the nature of the faith needed for salvation is very different from that of MacCulloch, pp. 210f. I am referring to the text of the Homily, however, he to Cranmer's personal view of faith.

relationships, *A Sermon against Whoredom and Uncleanesse* in the first book of 1547, probably written by Thomas Becon. Fornication was something to which the Homilist was opposed, but, as there are only so many ways of expressing this opposition, the Homily quickly becomes repetitious, so to break the monotony it provides an extended account of the treatment meted out to sexual backsliders in other historical and contemporary societies. These included brutal modes of execution, physical mutilation, and social exclusion, and the Homilist's regret that this sort of thing has passed out of use is palpable.⁹¹ His vehemence is puzzling. The composers of the Homilies were worldly and violent men, ready to torture and burn people, so it's hard to see why they could think that listening to a clergyman reading out a rant about sexual irregularity was going to do much to improve people's morals. One can readily imagine embarrassed shuffling during the reading, a reluctance to catch someone's eye, perhaps a general feeling that the minister was a fine one to talk, but not any upsurge in celibacy. That such a view is not altogether anachronistic is suggested by a sermon Latimer preached before the King, from which it is clear that the Homilies were not always closely attended to; for

... there is such talking and babbling in the church that nothing can be heard; and if the parish be good and the priest naught, he will so hack it and chop it [the Homily], that it were as good for them to be without it, for any word that shall be understood.⁹²

The Homilist, indeed, was well aware that he was not preaching to the converted, for he acknowledges that not everyone, perhaps not even most people, took "uncleanness" as seriously as he did, but

Counted [it] no sin at all, but rather a pastime, a dalliance, and but a touch of youth: not rebuked, but winked at: not punished, but laughed at.⁹³

Similar outrage is to be found early in the next century in a polemic by John Downname which draws on the Homily and extends the argument in ways relevant to this study; for Downname

91 There was some support for the wish to make adultery a capital offence, as it was to become, briefly, during the Commonwealth: Carrie Euler, 'Heinrich Bullinger, Marriage, and the English Reformation: "The Christen State of Matrimonye" in England, 1540-53', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34 (2003), 367-93.

92 Hugh Latimer, *Sermons by Hugh Latimer*, ed. by George Elwes Corrie, Parker Society, 22 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1844), Vol. II, 121.

93 Thomas Cranmer, *Certain Sermons, or Homelies Appoynted by the Kynges Maiestie, to Be Declared and Redde, by All Persones, Vicars, or Curates, Euery Sondaye in Their Churches, Where They Have Cure*. (London, 1547), sig. S4v.

considers that families in which one person is committing fornication or self abuse are turned into “secret stews and polluted brothels”.⁹⁴ Collective guilt and damnation resulting from contamination by a single miscreant are viewed with some relish by a writer (perhaps a bit over-preoccupied with masturbation) who took the view that levity about fornication, in its many guises, was as serious as the shortcoming itself. The sort of frivolity that Downname and the Homilist took exception to is exemplified by the scurrilous view of sexual misbehaviour of an Elizabethan courtier observing that some people were so addicted to lechery that when they heard the sixth Commandment read in church, they responded “Lord have mercie upon us, it grieves our hearts to keep this Law”,

And when the Commination is read on Ashwednesday, wherin is read, *Cursed be he that lyeth with his neighbours wife*, and let all the people say *Amen*; all these people either say nothing, or as a neighbour of mine said, *he-hem*;⁹⁵

The second Homily about family relationships is the one on marriage in the second book published in 1563. It starts with the assumption that wives were to be in subjugation to their husbands, even to fear them, and in return could expect honour. Couples should live together and

be ye all of one mind, having compassion one to another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing:⁹⁶

The Homily, though, early acknowledges that though wives were supposed to obey their husbands, many did not; which brings us back to the tribulations of Arthur Throckmorton. Indeed, long before the writing of the Homily can be found a softening of the requirement of obedience by the wife, to be replaced by mutuality in which

the one hath full possessyon of the other and eyther ought to be obeyent to the other in the secret duety of matrymony.⁹⁷

94 John Downname, *Foure Treatises Tending to Disswade All Christians from Foure No Less Hainous Then Common Sinnes*, (At London ... , 1608.), 148. For Downname, see Patrick Collinson, *Godly People : Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), 23.

95 John Harrington, *Sir John Harrington's A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, Called the Metemorphosis of Ajax* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 84.

96 *I Peter*, III: 1 – 2, 7 – 9.

97 William Harrington, *In This Boke Are Conteyned the Co[m]mendacions of Matrymony the Maner [and] Fourme of Contractyng Solempnysynge and Lyvyng in the Same*. ... (London: for Roberte Redman, 1528)

This approach is picked up in the Homily, which starts with a rehearsal of the familiar purposes of marriage, the avoidance of fornication, the production of children, and the provision of companionship, and it's the last of these on which the Homily concentrates. Marriage supposedly took care of the urge to fornicate, but replaced it with another sort of temptation, because the Devil was at work trying to destroy marital harmony. He did this through "will and self love", so these are the sins to be avoided, though

Few Matrimonies there be without chidings, brawling, taunting, repenting, bitter cursings, and fightings.⁹⁸

All this was at the instigation of "the ghostly enemy" who "stirreth them either to such rough and sharpe words, or stripes", an enemy who operated principally through pride, which meant a determination to dominate. Pride is the work of the Devil, so prayer was the first recourse, but to this prayer must be "joyned a singular diligence", particularly on the part of the husband who had to take the lead in bringing about concord by using "moderation and not tyranny": specifically not being "stiffe" with his weaker wife, but giving way to her in some matters, ignoring others, and generally exercising forbearance.⁹⁹ All husbands didn't behave like this, of course:

Howbeit the common sort of men doth judge, that such moderation should not become a man: For they say that it is a token of womanish cowardnesse, and therefore they thinke that it is a mans part to fume in anger, to fight with fiste and staffe.¹⁰⁰

Tolerance, though, will get better results than violence, because a woman is weak and emotional, and responds to having allowances made, not to coercion, and by such means a man will not only bring about domestic concord, "but shall have her heart in thy power and will".¹⁰¹ The process is cumulative: dissension hinders prayer, which is the chief means of resisting the devil's attempts to upset the peace of the family, and without prayer this disruption gets worse. As for the possible compromising of a husband's masculinity:

98 P. 531 of 1563 edition.

99 Ibid., p. 532.

100 Ibid., p. 533.

101 Ibid., p. 534.

A man may be a man, although hee doeth not use such extremitie, yea although he should dissemble some things in his wives manners.¹⁰²

A wife must obey, naturally, but obedience means trying to please her husband, which is not, apparently, the same as doing what she's told, and by pleasing her husband he will be happy to be at home so that

A good wife by obeying her husband, shall beare the rule.¹⁰³

That is to say she will control her husband through his affection for her. Conflicts are bound to occur, so the sensible wife will apologise for what she said and did in a temper, both to restore harmony and because submissiveness is ordained by scripture.

At this point the tone of the Homily changes abruptly, perhaps because the writer felt he had gone too far, or perhaps because of a change of author, but, for whatever reason, the second part of the Homily adopts a far more dogmatic insistence on a wife's subordination, not as a means to achieve harmony and get her way with her besotted husband, but because that's what women must do. The work as a whole, however, while not exactly egalitarian, makes clear that domestic power has to be earned rather than imposed, and that some of it will pass to the wife because of her husband's love for her.

This Homily and its line of argument will have been well known, its ideas familiar to congregations who regularly heard it in church. Whether anybody took much notice is another matter: wives may have nudged their husbands at appropriate moments, though it's not easy to picture the Throckmortons saying their prayers together, and Arthur went on being henpecked whatever the Homilist said. But regardless of its influence over actual behaviour, the Homily demonstrates that early modern morality, public and domestic, is not usefully thought of as a simple exercise of power or as an unthinking code. Children were supposed to honour and obey their parents not just because of what would happen to them if they didn't, but as an aspect of loving their neighbours. A husband's authority had to be negotiated, not assumed. No doubt children sometimes answered back, parents often hit their children, and many marriages were not

102 Ibid., p. 535.

103 Ibid., p. 536

the prayerful partnerships recommended by the Homilist, but it's the existence of ideas questioning these practices which are relevant to this study. By acknowledging and responding to ideas about what was sometimes accepted as right and appropriate, such as that it was unmanly for a husband to refrain from violence, the Homily implied a need to think about accepted standards, and moved ethics on from a mere set of rules.

There is evidence that people were indeed thinking about their relationships and their moral content. A few years later than the Homily a book by Edmund Tilney took a comparable approach to the question of marital obedience, and could well have been influenced by it.¹⁰⁴ Tilney's book takes the form of a disputation in an elegant company which includes Erasmus and Vives and a number of ladies and gentlemen. The subject of the discussion is marriage, and the structure is that of one speaker developing an argument and responding to questions and comments. Although there is little of the Socratic about it, framing the book as a debate allows commonplaces to be questioned, and one of these is the requirement for women to obey their husbands. The scriptural precept of obedience is not confronted directly, and gets due acknowledgement in the form of periodic expressions of Christian piety, but as obedience was also endorsed by other authorities it was possible to question it without seeming to undermine scripture. They include the example of classical history and practices in contemporary societies, and the support of wise authors such as Plutarch. By attacking pagan ideas it becomes possible to question unthinking obedience without directly contradicting biblical precepts:

Beleeve not daughter ... neither those ignorant Philosophers, nor those customes.¹⁰⁵

The general tone of the book is reflected in its subtitle, *The Flower of Friendship*. Marriage is meant to be pleasurable, quarrels are to be patched up in bed:

The best place is, as I sayde, when they are both in bed, a place appointed for reconcilements, and rening of love and friendship, let your words not be spitefull, but loving, kinde, gentle, mery and pleasaunt. For though the woman every where, ought to be mery with her mate: yet muste she chieflye in bed, thereby to shewe what love she beareth hym, where she may

104 Edmund Tilney, *A Briefe and Pleasant Discourse of Duties in Mariage, Called the Flower of Friendship* (London: By Henrie Denha[m], 1568).

105 Ibid., Sig. B4v.

lawfullye poure out into his bosome all the thoughtes, and secrets of hir loving hart.¹⁰⁶

Both spouses must exercise forbearance. The wife needs to consider whether her husband's chidings are legitimate: if they are, she should obey him, if they are not she has to dissemble:

For in nothing can a wyfe shewe a greater wysedome, than in dissembling with an importunate husbnde. Hir honest yea hir good nature, and hir prayse is shewed in nothing more, than in tollerating of an undiscrate man, ...¹⁰⁷

The husband should make light of disagreements, or, if he can't contain himself, take himself off for a walk:

There are manye occasions, that causeth variance betweene man and wyfe, as for their children, servants, apparell, and other household matters. In which the good married man must shewe his wysedome, eyther in turning it to sporte, & dissembling the cause, or aunswering not at all. If so bee he cannot suppress his anger, let him goe and digest it abroade.¹⁰⁸

Tilney's book went through a number of editions, evidence for the circulation of ideas that directly challenged the primacy of obedience in family relationships, at least as far as married couples were concerned. It suggested that domestic authority was circular rather than linear, reciprocal forbearance both more practical than unquestioning submissiveness and morally superior to it.

Homily and Catechism had little to say about other important aspects of family life, how parents should treat children and how brothers and sisters were supposed to act towards each other. Not that parents were without advice from other sources. There was a frequently cited passage in the Bible which suggested that physical force was a legitimate way of getting children to obey when they were minded not to:

106 Ibid., Sig. F2.

107 Ibid., Sig. C1v.

108 Ibid., Sig. C4

He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.¹⁰⁹

This became the common proverb “Spare the rod and spoil the child”, which sanitised outbursts of parental temper, but there were voices to be heard questioning the right of parents to use physical coercion. Montaigne, for example, opposed it:

I utterly condemne all maner of violence in the education of a yong spirit, brought up to honour and liberty. There is a kinde of slavishnesse in churlish-rigor, and servility in compulsion; and I hold, that that which can not be compassed by reason, wisdom and discretion, can never be attained by force and constraint. So was I brought up: they tell mee, that in all my youth, I never felt rod but twice, and that very lightly. And what education I have had my selfe, the same I have given my children. . . . I have seene no other effects in rods, but to make childrens mindes more remise, or more maliciously head-strong.¹¹⁰

Much earlier, Thomas More is said to have chastised his daughters as well as his sons, but using a peacock feather to do so, a symbolic version of Montaigne's argument. As with other forms of obedience, there was questioning of too much rigidity in bringing up children.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: HOW FUNNY WAS GOBBO?

An early modern child who had learned the Catechism in the Prayer Book would know that what was expected was general deference and its adjunct obedience, but only an exceptionally slow-witted child would have failed to notice that things were often otherwise. Not that most children had much choice in the matter, for parents and other people in authority could enforce obedience, which meant that it became a moral issue only when a child became able to disregard what was taught in the Catechism. Early modern drama is full of situations in which obedience was scanted or put under severe strain. Some of these situations will be analysed in later chapters, but the remainder of this one is given over to how the Commandment to honour parents was played out in one late Elizabethan drama, *The Merchant of Venice*.

This a play that puts my methodology under severe strain, for my general intention is to avoid

109 *Proverbs*, XII: 24.

110 Florio's Montaigne, 194.

talking about character, and to confine, as far as possible, discussion to ideas current in early modern England. But it is now impossible to approach the play without an awareness of the systematic attempt to exterminate European Jewry in the twentieth century, and of the pogroms and persecutions that led up to it, which we now know were rehearsals for the “final solution”. There can be no question, therefore, of suspending judgement on the detestable Antonio who has spat at and kicked Shylock, and makes no apology for it, and no twenty-first century production of the play, in English, is going to have Antonio as a nearly-tragic hero as was the case in many productions in the past.¹¹¹ It is necessary to exercise historical imagination to understand what was written centuries ago, but that is not the same as going native and subscribing to the values of the period.

This said, it is questionable whether *The Merchant of Venice* can usefully be described as an anti-Semitic appeal to contemporary bigotry. Bloom is in no doubt that it was, and sees the play as an opportunist riding of a wave of anti-Semitism provoked by the conviction and cruel execution of Lopez, the Queen's doctor, on a charge of attempting to murder her.¹¹² Edelman, however, points out that Lopez's Jewishness was scarcely mentioned at his trial – he was in any case a convert to Christianity – and that the commercial success of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* predated the Lopez trial - Shakespeare's play is usually assumed to be an attempt to capitalise on Marlowe's.¹¹³ Edelman also raises doubts about how common prejudice against Jews was in England at the end of the sixteenth century, and observes that the only Jew in English drama before Marlowe was an honest and sympathetic character.¹¹⁴ My discussion, therefore, starts with the assumption that the Christians in the play were not created by Shakespeare as representatives of a virtuous faith set against and ultimately thwarting attempted murder, but as morally defective as the later Shylock.

There are three fathers in the play, those of Portia, of Jessica, and of Lancelot Gobbo. Portia's father is dead but exerts his authority by the posthumous control of his daughter's marriage, and she seems prepared to accept this, which on the face of it is doing him the required honour. She admits to being tempted to cheat by coaching Bassanio in which casket to open, and when he's making his choice he is helped on his way with music, as his predecessors were not. The song is

111 John J. Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

112 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 171ff.

113 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Charles Edelman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2ff.

114 Charles Edelman, “Which is the Jew ...?”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 52 (1999), 99 – 106.

“Tell me where is Fancy bred”, and in modern productions it's usual to sing it with a heavy emphasis on the rhymes of bred, head, and nourished to indicate “lead”, so Portia's dutifulness to her late father is certainly questionable.¹¹⁵

The most shameless lack of honour for a parent is that of Shylock's daughter Jessica, who speaks only thirteen words to him in the course of the play, a total of two sentences of which one is a lie. Left in charge of his house, she elopes with Lorenzo taking much of her father's wealth with her. The couple get through eighty ducats in an evening, and as a single jewel she has stolen is worth 2,000 ducats, the scale of her theft is apparent, for 3,000 ducats was enough to fund Bassanio's trip to Belmont. Jessica and her husband arrive at Portia's house immediately after Bassanio and Gratiano have, in the latter's words, won the golden fleece.¹¹⁶ Gratiano was present when Jessica had already stolen much of her father's money and was going back for more, and was, therefore, complicit in her crimes, although Portia at this stage may be presumed not to have known who she was welcoming into her house, which she entrusts to their keeping, a most unwise act in view of Jessica's behaviour the last time she was left in charge. The disconcerting conclusion is that Jessica, who has not only dishonoured her father but is also a common criminal, as is her husband, is not viewed in any reprehensible light by the Venetians at Belmont. At the end of the trial there is more collusion with what they have done when Antonio secures Shylock's remaining wealth by forcing him to leave it to them in his will. This is done with the full approval of the Duke, who had earlier been pursuing Jessica as she was absconding with her father's money (II.viii.4ff), an attempt at law-enforcement now, it seems, abandoned.

The official morality of sixteenth century England, then, counts for nothing in the imagined life of Christian Venice, but the play provides a sustained commentary on Jessica's behaviour in a scene which precedes her flight and which prefigures and parallels it. In a series of laboured comic exchanges, Lancelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant and a clown, debates with himself whether to leave his master's employment. This takes the form of a parody of a psychomachia between his conscience, which urges him to stay with Shylock, and “the fiend”, which tempts him to run away, but although the tone of the scene is facetious, there are indications that it is about something much more serious. The presence of this fiend and its temptations, and of Gobbo's

115 As everyone by now knows that the lead casket contains Portia's picture, some productions make his deliberations perfunctory because he has been tipped off: see S. F. Johnson, “Portia's cheating: how many ways Portia informs Bassanio's choice”, in John M. Mucciolo, ed., *Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions: Essays in Honour of W.R. Elton* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996).

116 Though Bassanio had earlier used the same description of his quest.

conscience, suggests a religious element in the clowning, and as the enlarged Commandment extended the requirement of honour to include all those set in authority over us, which in his case includes Shylock, “conscience” must refer to this too. On top of this general obligation there is specific scriptural warrant for patience in the service of an unsatisfactory master as a Christian duty:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all feare; not onely to the good and courteous, but also to the frowarde. For this is thanke worthie, if a man for conscience towarde God endure grief suffering wrongfully.¹¹⁷

(“Servant” is a wilful mistranslation of the Greek “slave”, which puts Peter's advice in a different moral register from that of a comment on a proper attitude to one's employers, and Shylock is later to take his Christian antagonists to task for owning slaves. Gobbo, though, is legally free, whatever the promptings of his conscience.)

Gobbo's conscience turns out to be a fragile organ and the upshot of his debate is that he decides to “flee”. Just as he starts to do so, however, his father, “blind, with a basket”, arrives and Young Gobbo decides to “try confusions” with him. This takes the form of misleading him about who he's talking to, taking advantage of the old man's blindness, and generally ridiculing him before, finally, asking his blessing. Old Gobbo at this stage is so confused that he takes some persuading that it is indeed his son and not an imposter who is seeking this blessing.

Young Gobbo is playing with fire. He is breaching the fifth Commandment twice, by his disloyalty to his master and by his treatment of his father, and there's a further layer of prohibition at work. “A Commination against Sinners” in *The Book of Common Prayer* was used on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, when attendance at church was high, as well as on another four or five times a year, so it was familiar to most people in an early modern audience.¹¹⁸ Among the list of sinners cursed in the Commination's list are two directly applicable to Lancelot Gobbo:

Cursed is he that curseth his father, or mother. ... Cursed is he that maketh the blynde to go out

117 *1Peter*, II: 18f. The AV has “gentle” for “courteous”.

118 BCP p. 744.

of hys way.¹¹⁹

To both of these the congregation answered “Amen”.¹²⁰ (In Gobbo's defence it must be said that blindness is not always treated with much sympathy in the Old Testament, though most scriptural references to it are metaphorical, referring to spiritual blindness. Forbidden to worship in the temple is anyone

who hath any blemishes, as a man blind or lame, or that hath a flat nose, or that hath any mishapen member, ... or a crook back, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or have his stones broken”.¹²¹

Even more uncompromising is David's promise to “prefer”

Whoever smiteth the Jebulites, and getteth up to the gutters and smiteth the lame and blind, which David's soul hateth¹²²

Despite this, it's evident from the Commination that treating blind people, especially a parent, with contempt was not acceptable in early modern England).

Gobbo's leavetaking from Shylock is given far more prominence than its importance to the plot might seem to justify, which suggests that it has a wider dramatic purpose. It's not clear whether Lancelot ever obtains his father's blessing, but father and son go on to solicit Bassanio for a job for the young man, and Lancelot is taken onto the strength of Bassanio's gold-digging enterprise, in which he is to wear a richer livery than his colleagues. It emerges that Shylock had earlier recommended Gobbo to Bassanio, which may explain this unexpected promotion, since Bassanio had been hard put to it to understand what the Gobbos wanted because their speech was so garbled. For his part Shylock expresses mixed feelings about losing Gobbo (“The patch is kind enough”), but transferring an idle and greedy servant to Bassanio has the advantage, for Shylock, that Bassanio's borrowed money will be spent all the faster. This will make Antonio's forfeiture

119 BCP p. 177.

120 For good measure, *The Book of Proverbs* enlarges on the consequences of breaking the Commandment: “The eye that mocketh his father and despiseth the instruction of his mother, let the ravens of the valley picke it out, and the yong egles eat it”: XXX: 17.

121 *Leviticus*, XXI: 17 – 20.

122 *2Samuel*, V: 8.

more likely, though at this stage of the play his losses have not started to build up, and it's Shylock's wealth that is damaged by Gobbo when he becomes the go-between helping to organise Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo.

The importance of Lancelot's protracted departure from Shylock' service starts to emerge when his muddled father attempts to bless him. “Stage tradition ... makes” Lancelot kneel with his back to his father, so that when Old Gobbo feels the back of the young man's head, he finds it unexpectedly hairy:

... what a beard has thou got! Thou hast got more hair in thy chin than Dobbin my fill horse has on his tail.¹²³ (II, ii, 89)

This picks up on an earlier exchange between Antonio and Shylock about how Jacob, the future father of Israel, had increased his share of his uncle's flock by a subterfuge. Jacob had already obtained his father's blessing “with subtlety”, for when old age had dimmed his father Isaac's eyes, the old man asked his first born son Esau to bring him venison and make him savoury meat and thereby earn this blessing. Rebekah, Isaac's wife, told her son Jacob to bring two kids from the herd, and from these she made the savoury meat her husband craved. She then disguised Jacob in Esau's clothes, and put the skins of the goats on his hands and neck, since Esau was hairy and Jacob was not. The deception worked. The blind old man felt the goats' hair, and recognised the smell of the garments, and blessed Jacob instead of Esau. Jacob had demurred when his mother proposed the deception:

My father may possibly feel me, and I shall seem to him to be a mocker: so shall I bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.¹²⁴

This was brushed aside by his mother, whose part in the fraud was spoken approvingly of by Shylock,

As his wise mother wrought on his behalf. (I.iii.65)

¹²³ *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by Horace Howard Furness, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, 7, 8th ed (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1888), 69.

¹²⁴ *Genesis*, XXVII: 12.

The incident raised eyebrows in Protestant England, for glosses in The Geneva Bible observe that

This subtilitie is blameworthie Jakob did evil to seke it [blessing] by lies and the more because he abuseth gods Name.¹²⁵

The Gobbos, therefore, are burlesquing the confusion of a blind father laying hands in blessing on a hirsute son about whose identity he is unclear, and Lancelot is undoubtedly a mocker of his father. That he is also a blasphemer is evident from the parody of the *Gloria* when he puts a stop to “more fooling about it” and assures his father that

I am Lancelot, your boy that was, your son that is, your child that shall be. (II.ii.80)

There are further connections between Jacob and *The Merchant of Venice*. Jacob married two of his uncle's daughters, one of whom was Leah, the name of Shylock's wife, the other Rachel. One day Jacob “stole away” with his household and, unknown to her husband, Rachel rifled her father's idols during the move, and subsequently frustrated attempts by her husband and father to recover them.¹²⁶ Again, the parallels with *The Merchant of Venice* are apparent: a servant leaving his master, a daughter stealing from her father, both in the sense of theft, and of a furtive departure. Lorenzo is to pun on these two meanings in the moonlight scene:

In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with a unthrift love did run from Venice (V. I. 14)

God's rejection of Esau repeats a similar preference a generation earlier when he had chosen Isaac over his brother. Abr(ah)am had two sons. One, Ishmael was by his concubine Hagar, the other, Isaac was by his wife, and when he was born Ishmael and his mother were sent away, so when Shylock calls Gobbo “That fool of Hagar's offspring”, he identifies him with Ishmael, the outcast and like Gobbo a jester.

125 Gloss on *Genesis* XXVII: 9 and 19.

126 “Images” in AV.

There is another Biblical commentary on Lancelot Gobbo's flight in *The Epistle to Philemon* which concerns a runaway servant, actually a slave, named Onesimus,

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable both to thee and to me ...¹²⁷

Lancelot Gobbo was “snail-slow in profit”, and helped Jessica's theft from her father, and Paul goes on to recognise that Onesimus might have hurt Philemon, or owe him something, which the Geneva Bible's glosses that Onesimus “robbed his master, and fled away”.

“GOD FORBID.”

Young Gobbo's treatment of his father along with his abandonment of Shylock are more than local episodes in a play, for they lead into larger questions about the relationship between faith and works that had been so neatly sidelined in the Homilies. The disregard by Gobbo and Jessica of the Commandment about honouring parents aligns by analogy and allusion with a scriptural narrative with important implications, for Jacob's rickety life is central to one element of Christian theology. Knowledgeable churchmen and laity had difficulty with the thought, or suspicion, that conventional morality was futile. Salvation came from faith, and though the Homilies on good works elegantly disposed, as we have seen, of any suggestion that it might therefore not matter how people behaved, questions remained. The hardest of these concerned predestination, rescued from the Augustinian obscurity, where it would better have been left, by the early reformers. Despite Jacob's dubious behaviour, God approved of him.¹²⁸ This is the basis for the most unequivocal scriptural assertion of the doctrine of predestination and its bewilderments. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, Paul wrote:

As it is written, I have loved Jacob, & have hated Esau. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousnes with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I wil have mercie on him, to whom I wil shewe mercie: and wil have compassion on him, on whome I wil have compassion. So then it is not in him that willeth, nor in him that runeth, but in God that

¹²⁷ *Philemon*, V: 11.

¹²⁸ I consulted a Salvation Army officer about this, and her view was that it was an illustration of God's willingness to work with imperfect human material.

sheweth mercie. ... Therefore he hathe mercie on whome he wil, & whome he wil, he hardeneth.¹²⁹

That Shakespeare knew this passage is plain from a close paraphrase of the crucial sentence in *Measure for Measure*, when Claudio says of authority

On whom it will, it will;

On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just.¹³⁰

The trouble that this chapter has caused is incalculable, though an account of it is unnecessary for this study.¹³¹ The word “runeth”, however, must detain us, for “run” is the verb used several times by Gobbo and his “fiend” when tempted to leave Shylock, and if this is indeed a conscious echo of the Epistle, it further embeds Jacob in the texture of the play to indicate that Gobbo's change of jobs and its associated mockery of his father have serious overtones. The debate between conscience and fiend recalls the contest for a soul found in late medieval drama, of which *Everyman* is a notable example, and dramatically it looks forward to the soliloquy which was soon to replace the monologue addressed to the audience as Gobbo's still is, even though it anticipates the interior dialogue of the soliloquy proper. The ostensibly frivolous tone allows the witty inversion of the fiend tempting Gobbo to leave the devil while his conscience urges him to stay, but the introduction of devil and damnation into the comedy feeds into a key theme in the play, that of damnation and its associated demonology. Shylock is associated with the Devil by his Christian persecutors, and Jessica is sorry to part with Gobbo, “a merry devil” in the house which she describes as hell. Earlier Gobbo had described Shylock as “the very devil” in justification for his yielding to the fiend's temptation, and when Lancelot is bullying his father he tells him that his son is dead, “or, as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven” (II.ii.60). “Marry, God forbid” is the old man's response, and though the expression is too common to infer a reference to *Romans*, there may be a link in the chain of allusion to Jacob and his family, of

129 *Romans*, IX: 13ff. This is the 1560 Geneva Bible version. It differs from the Authorised Version mainly in the prepositions: “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness in God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy. ... Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth”. “Runneth” is echoed by Lancelot Gobbo's “running with thy heels”, which it would suit my argument to be intentional.

130 *Measure for Measure*, I.ii.114.

131 A comprehensive narrative and analysis is Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), passim, especially 144 – 183.

divine choice and rejection whereby Jacob was preferred to Esau, whom God hated, and Isaac was chosen over Ishmael, who became an outcast.

WHAT DID AUDIENCES KNOW?

The indignant reader will by now be protesting that by rummaging in footnotes and a concordance, even drawing on some personal familiarity with the Bible, I have loaded an inconsequential episode with theological and other associations of which a normal reader, one not given to rummaging, would not expect to find.¹³² It was, though, Shakespeare who put the story of Jacob and Laban's sheep into Shylock's mouth, which inevitably draws attention to the scriptural echoes of the mistaken blessing by a blind father. This in its turn opened a line of thought into intractable problems of Protestant theology with disconcerting resonances to the breach of the fifth Commandment committed by Gobbo and Jessica.

There is a note of menace in the Biblical version of the Commandment: "Honour thy father and mother that thy days may be long", and an ominous outcome is hinted at for Jessica, even as she appears to be thriving despite having failed to honour her father. She is not found in the sources of the play, which suggests she had a particular dramatic function, and in her pretty exchanges (V.i) with her lover-accomplice, they compare the beauty of the night in which they are lying with the nights experienced by a series of other lovers. These are Troilus and Cressida, Dido and Aeneas, Pyramus and Thisbe, in the company of Medea, all tragic or faithless lovers whose fates have the effect of associating Jessica and Lorenzo with catastrophe and infidelity (V,i,1). All these doomed lovers, apart from Troilus and Cressida, are to be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, though the reference in it to Dido and Aeneas is brief. Ovid was well known to the educated, though not necessarily to people who could not read very well or had no access to books.¹³³ Pyramus and Thisbe made an appearance of sorts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it may well be that many people in early audiences knew nothing of these lovers and therefore missed their significance as a comment on Jessica's behaviour. For those who knew the stories, however, Jessica's apparent success will have appeared fragile from its association with these doomed lovers of fable, and, indeed, the couple are already teasing one another with accusations of faithlessness and lying and Lorenzo is starting to be jealous of Gobbo "if you thus get my

¹³² The example of Onessimus seems not to have been noticed by commentators.

¹³³ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Bate offers no assessment about how generally known Ovid was.

wife in corners” (III.v.27). The future looks uncertain.

The mythological allusions may not have been obvious to everyone, and the same is true of the scriptural references in the play. When writing the scene with the Gobbos, Shakespeare could take for granted that his audience knew of the Commandment about the honour due to parents, and he could probably also assume a familiarity with the Commination. The parallel between Gobbo's and Jacob's misleading of a blind father was another matter: Shakespeare himself must have read the relevant chapters of *Genesis*, but his knowledge of scripture may well have been exceptional. The scriptural allusions are baffling to modern audiences, and probably also were to many members of Tudor ones.

There have been a number of attempts to identify biblical references in Shakespeare, often the work of devout people intent on establishing his religious credentials, and sometimes finding links about which a less partisan reader might be sceptical. The most recent example provides numerous examples of scriptural echoes in Shakespeare and infers some sort of perpetual intertextuality from their frequency.¹³⁴ An earlier study by Noble divided sightings into those he thought certain, probable, or possible, and Shaheen later worked through the plays one by one with a tendency to give the benefit of the doubt in examples which often look more like coincidences.¹³⁵ In addition to these surveys there have been studies of scriptural references in *The Merchant of Venice* itself, with general agreement that it is a play particularly rich in such allusions, many of them intentional, though their significance is contested.¹³⁶ One reading, for example, sees the play as a Christian apologetic, the scriptural references spelling out a theological message, another sees it as an allegory of Christian truth, of the New Testament replacing the Old.¹³⁷

What these studies tend to assume, though, is that Shakespeare's evident knowledge of

134 Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

135 Richmond Samuel Howe Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge: And Use of the Book of Common Prayer as Exemplified in the Plays of the First Folio* (London : NewYork: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge ; Macmillan Co, 1935); Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999); and cf Maurice Hunt, *Shakespeare's Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Tolerance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Charles Wordsworth, *Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible*, 3rd ed (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1880) is an unabashed work of piety by a bishop.

136 Usefully summarised in Mahood, in the New Cambridge edition, pp. 184 – 88; which acknowledges her debt to Noble.

137 John S. Coolidge, 'Law and Love in The Merchant of Venice', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 27 (1976), 243–63; Barbara K. Lewalski, 'Biblical Allusion and Allegory in "The Merchant of Venice"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 13.3 (1962), 327–43..

sections of the Old Testament – which he may have worked up specifically in preparation for writing the play – was shared by an audience which would readily have spotted his references and been able to interpret them. But what was familiar to a highly literate actor-playwright with a retentive memory was not necessarily so to everybody else. Anyone who had attended a grammar school, as Shakespeare probably did, would have been exposed to the Bible, but as entry to these schools was not based on intellectual merit but on parental status, there must have been plenty of grammar school boys who got little profit from their education. Only a minority of men, and no women at all, had in any case been to grammar school and little is known about the educational curriculum outside these schools.

There were plenty of Bibles in existence, some of them physically very small and in consequence densely printed, but how many people could read them is another matter.¹³⁸ There is little agreement about levels of literacy in early modern England, for all that the discussion has rumbled on for decades. Stone claimed that over half the male population of London could read, Cressy thought that, by the time the playhouses were closed in 1642, only a third of men and one in ten women could write their names, and Spufford argued that this may have underestimated the number of people able to *read*, as many will have left school having learned to read but before learning to write.¹³⁹ There is no prospect of resolving the question, because the only available “hard” evidence is the proportion of documents endorsed by a person's mark rather than a signature, and most people will never have had any occasion even to see such documents. What matters for my argument is how extensive knowledge of the Bible was, and here research on how many people could read is unhelpful because literacy is not a simple binary but a matter of degree. To pick up Spufford's point, it's not likely that someone who hadn't learned to write would be able to read with any confidence, and there must have been, then as now, some people who could read better than others: better in being able to understand more complicated writing, and able to read in a sustained way. Sustained reading in turn implies access to an expensive Bible, and a wish and the leisure to read extensively in it, as well as contingent factors such as adequate lighting, a costly item in northern European winters, and the availability of spectacles. Silent reading was probably not the normal practice, so one reader could have had a number of hearers, and no doubt there were many families in which such reading was a central part of life, just as

138 Shaheen says the Geneva Bible was popular because “most editions were published as compact, handy-sized quarto volumes”: Shaheen, p. 27; large pockets.

139 Lawrence Stone, ‘The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640’, *Past & Present*, (1964), 41–80; David Cressy, ‘Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730’, *The Historical Journal*, 20.1 (1977), 1–23; Margaret Spufford, ‘First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers’, *Social History*, 4.3 (1979), 407–35.

there were surely also families in which it was not. It would be incautious, therefore, to assume widespread scriptural knowledge derived from direct reading when there's no means of knowing how extensive this was.

Personal reading, of course, was only one way of learning the Bible. For many, perhaps most, people scriptural knowledge was also acquired by hearing the Bible in church where the reading of scripture was an integral part of the liturgy. People were required to attend church, and faced a fine if they didn't, though this requirement must have been difficult to police in teeming cities made up of parishes which were small in area and had constantly shifting populations.¹⁴⁰ It was probably easy enough for irreligious Londoners, who were no doubt well-represented in playhouse audiences, to avoid going to church, so knowledge of the Bible derived from church attendance should not, therefore, be taken for granted, though the great majority of people would have had at least some exposure to scripture by this means.

But even a diligent parishioner had a sketchy knowledge if it was based entirely on listening in church, for the readings were selective. The Psalter was read through each month, the New Testament, apart from the *Book of Revelation*, three times a year, and the Old Testament once,

Excepte certain bokes and Chapters, whiche be leaste edifying, and mighte beste bee spared, and therefore bee lefte unread.¹⁴¹

Standards change, but there must have been a lot in the Old Testament that could never have been classed as edifying. Some of the more startling episodes in the personal lives of David and Solomon, such as David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, or Lot's drunken incest with his daughters, were not the sort of thing that church congregations were expected to emulate, but, edifying or not, they were included in what was to be read.

There was therefore an element of censorship in the selection of readings which had been laid down in the Edwardian Lectionary, from which whole books of the Old Testament, notably *The*

140 Horton. Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Hooker* / by Horton Davis. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). Judith D. Maltby, *Prayer Book and People: Religious Conformity before the English Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) argues against any rigid distinction between "godly" and less enthusiastic religious observance in the period.

141 William Bright, ed. *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth, 1559; to Which Are Appended Some Occasional Forms of Prayer Issued in Her Reign* (London & Sydney, Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1890), 23.

Song of Solomon, were excluded. Further rationing was brought in by the Elizabethan prayer book which introduced a separate selection of readings for Sundays and feast days. These took precedence over the regular selections in the Lectionary, with the result that access by the laity to most of the Old Testament became even more selective (though Lot and his daughters had their story told once a year, oddly enough on the first Sunday in Lent).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock admired Jacob, whose devious goings on are to be found in *Genesis* (Chapters 25 to 33). Referring to the episode of Jacob and his uncle's sheep described by Shylock, Daniell, who presumes a high level of "functional" literacy, asserts, without supporting evidence, that Shakespeare "has the confidence" to know that his audiences would be familiar with this "strange tale".¹⁴² It to be found in *Genesis*, Chapter 30, which was read out on 17th of January at Morning Prayer, *except* when that date was a Sunday. Anyone who was in church only on Sundays and major festivals, therefore, would not have heard of it. Antonio's question, "And what of him?" invites Shylock to tell a story which despite Daniell's confidence may not have been well enough known to be understood as a simple allusion. Jacob's deception of his blind father, on the other hand, is in Chapter 27, which was read each year at Morning Prayer on the second Sunday in Lent (as well as at Morning Prayer on 15th of January). It will have been known to to the conscientious worshipper who attended church on Sunday mornings, though hearing the story once a year may not have lodged it all that securely in the memory where it jostled with all the other material heard in church, and the rest of Jacob's story was not among the prescribed readings on Sundays.¹⁴³

The overall uncertainty about audiences' scriptural knowledge raises a particular question for *The Merchant of Venice*. When Portia has initially ruled in Shylock's favour, he responds

A Daniel come to judgement, yea a Daniel. (IV,i,223)

This is echoed by Gratiano after Portia has outwitted Shylock. The difficulty is that the Daniel referred to is not the hero and narrator of the Old Testament *The Book Of Daniel* which tells the story of the burning fiery furnace, but makes no mention of him as the judge and detective who

142 'Reading the Bible', in David Scott Kastan, *A Companion to Shakespeare*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 3 (Oxford, etc, Blackwell, 1999), 158–71.

143 This was the situation with the Prayer Book of 1559; in the Edwardian books of 1549 and 1552 the chapter was read at Evensong (Evening Prayer in 1552) on January 15th.

exposes the men who falsely accused Susanna of adultery and saves her life. This is found in *The History of Susanna* which is in the Apocrypha, not in the Protestant canon, though the Geneva Bible notes of the *History* that “some joyne [it] to the end of Daniel, and make it the 13. chap.”. In the Elizabethan Lectionary, but not in that of 1662, the prescribed readings for Morning and Evening Prayer on the 26th of August was Chapters 13 and 14 of *The Book of Daniel*, which in the Protestant canon has only twelve chapters. Daniel the judge, therefore, found his way into an obscure corner of the English liturgy (Chapter 14 has the story of Daniel in the lions' den, among other instances of God's power), but he can't have been known about by anyone who relied on the Lectionary for knowledge of scripture, so there's uncertainty about what audiences might have understood by Shylock's reference to him, and about why Shakespeare made the allusion.¹⁴⁴

CONCLUSION.

The Merchant of Venice ends with the traditional erotic conciliation of comedy, the intensity of the trial replaced by the beauty of the moonlight dialogue, the tawdry couple achieving something near sublimity as they are transformed by the power of music. The rest of the final act is, mostly, light-hearted fooling as misunderstandings are cleared up and harmony prevails. The play works well as a tragicomedy in which disaster is averted. Shylock's murderous revenge is thwarted, there is cross-dressing with plenty of attendant bawdy, and familiar comic types like Morocco and Arragon and a clown who mangles the language. One of the functions of comedy is to subvert the established order, and if the winning side in the play doesn't behave as well as it might, this is in the context of comedy doesn't stand out as important. Antonio doesn't have to repay the loan that caused all the trouble, Shylock doesn't get his money back from his daughter, who's spent much of it anyway, but the suspect morals of just about everyone in the play gets lost in the entertainment.¹⁴⁵

Comedy or not, however, the narrative of *The Merchant of Venice* is one in which a disregard for elementary moral standards in family relationships is richly rewarded. How people were supposed to behave was made clear, as Rogers argued, in catechism and homily, in which scriptural precepts and social convention were integrated into a coherent code of practical morality. The familiarity of this code provided a stable vantage point from which to evaluate the behaviour of Gobbo and Jessica, and nobody could possibly have thought that how they treated

144 The 1662 Lectionary disposes of these two chapters by adjusting earlier and later entries; I have no suggestions about why this might have been thought necessary.

145 Old Gobbo and Balthasar behave well.

their fathers was compatible with this morality. They were both in callous breach of the Commandment to honour their parents, and Jessica's hands had, for good measure, indulged in “picking and stealyng” on a grand scale, making off with her father's portable wealth in a criminal act which in any early modern society would find the culprit “adjudged to totter in a rope”¹⁴⁶. Yet there's nothing to suggest that any of this behaviour was considered reprehensible in Belmont, and after his initial pursuit of Jessica the Venetian Duke makes no objection that she is to be further rewarded by Antonio's stipulating that Shylock must leave her and her husband what's left of his wealth at his death. And if a lack of filial duty is laughed at in the play, a husband's authority is equally uncertain. When accepting Bassanio as her husband, Portia delivers a mealy-mouthed speech of submissiveness:

Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted: but now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,
This house, these servants and this same myself
Are yours, my lord (III.ii.163)

All this is conditional, however, on the safekeeping of a ring, so it's not the absolute obedience of the ideal wife, and since it doesn't take long to swindle the ring from Bassanio, his patriarchal authority is short lived.

What I have described as the official morality of family life in early modern England is anyway much less important than money in the play. The loan from Shylock was to fund the pursuit of a rich woman who had the additional advantage of being “fair”, though this was not the first thing that Bassanio says about her. “Money is your suit”, says Shylock with the double meaning of courting him for a loan and Portia for her money. Bassanio's dismissal of gold and

¹⁴⁶ This unpleasant expression comes from George Whetstone, *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), II.vii.: in Bullough, Volume II, 442 – 513; this line on p. 457.

silver as “gaudy” and “common drudge” when choosing the lead casket is belied by his frankness at the start of the play that his main concern is to clear the debts caused by his extravagance. He speaks of Portia in the language of wealth (“richly left ... nothing undervalued ... worth ... thrift ... fortunate”), and the language of the play conflates love with money, symbolised by Portia's “golden fleece”, an indecent image enlarged by Bassanio when he has won it. As the lead casket is opened he is greeted by Portia's portrait in which

Here in her hairs
The painter plays the spider and hath woven
A golden mesh t'entrap the hearts of men
Faster than gnats in cobwebs. (III.ii.120)

In this materialist world, Jessica's right to help herself to her father's money seems to be taken for granted, partly no doubt because he was a Jew.

The comedy is played out in a society which rewards amorality and crime, and one characterised by subterfuge and deception. When Portia arrives at court she tells two lies in her first two words to the Duke, and her whole performance there is a pretence. When the trial is over, she and Nerissa continue the now redundant subterfuge in order to retrieve the ring

Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (III.ii.164)

It doesn't take much to wheedle it out of Bassanio, and the trap is sprung. He, in any case, is also fraudulent, using borrowed money to pretend to be wealthy so as to compete with “renowned suitors”, actually buffoons like Morocco and Arragon and the rest. It turns out that he needn't have bothered because he was the one Portia wanted, an irony that is never mentioned, but an example of the futility so prominent in much of *The Merchant of Venice*. There's little soul-searching or drawing of conclusions in the play, which ends with discussion about whether it's too early or too late for the newly married couples to go to bed, giving Gratiano the coarsely facetious last word:

But were the day come, I should wish it dark,
That I were couching with the doctor's clerk.
Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring. (V.i.504)

The dominant amorality is actively challenged only by Shylock, and the comedy sets a tone of general amiability once Antonio is out of danger. The questioning comes from the language of the play, which is frequently metaphysical, with damnation and devils prominent in its vocabulary and imagery, and this disarms any illusion that this is no more than a sunny comedy of consummated love and the victory of good over evil. This language encroaches on the play's overt action, and tells a different story from the success of Jessica and Gobbo, for there is another ethic discernible behind the prevailing moral instability, introduced when Lancelot Gobbo's defection from Shylock's service is accompanied by unsettling Biblical allusions to the story of Jacob which its grim theological implications, that God hardens who He wishes. The same ethic lies concealed in the business of the rings, though the flurry of activity on stage rushes the episode to its conclusion with little chance to recognise that behind it lie broken promises and deceit, mutual betrayal of trust in a house where mistrust is becoming endemic. The indecent undertones to the stychomythia about the rings reinforces the lack of moral seriousness in all the characters involved in the episode, and only in retrospect does it become plain that it not just a mildly entertaining anticlimax after the intensity, intellectual and emotional, of the trial, but a comment on it.

The shadow across Jessica's happiness has already been mentioned. The ominous identification with the suicide Dido, the filicide Medea, and the faithless Cressida, recurs when Lancelot Gobbo observes

Therefore be o' good cheer, for truly I think you are damned. (III.v.4)

The jocular inversion of being happy to be damned covers up something less funny, that she is to be damned not for what she has done, but for who she is, Shylock's daughter. Shylock had earlier predicted she would be be damned for her treatment of him (III.i.30), but now the sins of the

father “are to be laid on the children”. Even if she were the result of her mother's adultery, says Gobbo, Jessica would still be damned, because her mother's sin would be visited on her. Jessica's response is that her conversion to Christianity will save her, allowing Gobbo to make a bawdy joke about the price of pork, but raising the subject of salvation reopens earlier questions about divine justice.

Shylock drops out of sight at the end of the trial, for he is scarcely mentioned in the last act, and also marginalised is his commercial adversary Antonio, whose sadness with which the play opened had reappeared as he awaited Shylock's knife, brandished in the name of justice:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me. (IV.i.114)

“Tainted wether” sounds scriptural, but isn't, and it recalls Shylock's reference to Laban's sheep, and to the theological implications of God's inexplicable preference for Jacob. God's justice is unfathomable, and justice in the play is exercised by trickery and subterfuge much as Jacob practised to achieve his ends. What happens to Antonio at the end of the play is uncertain: perhaps he must watch the man he loves go off to bed with his new wife while he is ignored. Shylock, however, is to be christened. This will give him a new start through regeneration by “the mystical washinge away of synne”, his past iniquities discounted:

We beseeche the (for thine infinite mercies) that thou wilt mercifully loke upon these children, sanctify them and wash them with thy holy gost, that they beyng delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the Arcke of Christes churche ... that finally they may come to the land of everlasting life¹⁴⁷

There is an implicit challenge to the dominant morality of Bassanio and Portia in this possibility of salvation for Shylock when he is forced to convert to Christianity. In another respect also the invisible Shylock of the last act calls into question the values of its society, for he is now poor. The society in which the rich thrive and the poor suffer is that of the beggar Lazarus whose

147 *Eliz BCP*, p.108.

earthly misery ends with him in Abraham's bosom and with the rich man in hell appealing for mercy from Father Abraham.¹⁴⁸ At the start of the play Bassanio is the impoverished beggar cadging from Antonio, at the end of the trial the beggar has become Shylock, ordered to his knees by Portia to beg for his life. Shylock's earlier invocation of "Father Abram" may be coincidence, but Jessica's comment on Bassanio equivocally links salvation with earthly fortune:

It is very meet
The Lord Bassanio live an upright life;
For, having such a blessing in his lady,
He finds the joys of heaven here on earth;
And if on earth he do not mean it, then
In reason he should never come to heaven. (III.v.68)

Bassanio, in other words, is so fortunate in this life that only upright behaviour will get him to heaven. This may not be orthodox theology, but it belongs with an intuitive morality which connects salvation with conduct.

Before leaving for the trial, Portia uttered a curious paradox: "I never did repent for doing good", which raises the question of why anyone would repent for doing good. Penitence is not much in evidence in the play, and if Jessica and Gobbo regret breaking the Commandment to honour their parents they make no mention of it. Identifying filial subversion as a central theme in *The Merchant of Venice* inevitably smacks of special pleading, and I am not suggesting that early audiences would have seen this as dominating a play about the antagonisms of Shylock and Antonio and the courtship of Portia. References to a lack of honour for fathers are, however, prominent enough to be picked up by an audience attuned to the Commandments as an early modern one was. As I suggested earlier, however, the theological ramifications of the scriptural references that Shakespeare introduced into the play may well have been lost on much of his audience some of whom had scarcely heard of Jacob and were unaware of what it might mean for the destinations of their souls that God had preferred him to his brother. These breaches of the fifth Commandment were implicit, therefore, for there are no references to them in the text, so it's doubtful whether this was the first thought that came to mind when listening to Gobbo's

148 *Luke*, XVI: 19 – 26.

conscience fighting a losing battle with the fiend, or watching Jessica rifling her father's property. This can only mean that Shakespeare was creating differential levels of confusion in moral responses to the play, not in itself surprising, for he wrote for different audiences for much of his career, but in demonstrating his familiarity with Protestant theology he may have been exhibiting his own Protestant credentials to knowledgeable people, a sensible thing to do at a time when Elizabeth was not going to last much longer, and when her likely successor was an enthusiastic Protestant.

The Merchant of Venice, then, works on several levels. As a comedy can it be enjoyed for its various plots and characters, with the bonus of the trial scene, a most effective piece of drama to contrast with the fun. An underlying bitterness to the humour saves the play from sentimentality, and is present in the language which experienced theatre audiences would readily perceive. Behind the sardonic humour, moreover, were intellectual issues that do not need to be understood to enjoy the play, but add a dimension to it for anyone aware of them. These concern salvation and damnation.

The liturgy of the Church of England teaches that salvation is available to everyone, even Shylock, if they are sincerely penitent. By the end of the sixteenth century the Church's formal theology was a modified Calvinism and included an acceptance of predestination, made clear in the Articles of Religion but kept well away from the ordinary worshipper at church. Predestination and its mysteries are almost entirely absent from the Prayer Book, though there is a passing reference to the elect in the Catechism, but its wording makes clear that the respondent is among them: "me and all the elect people of God".¹⁴⁹ The tragic universe implicit in this theology is beyond human understanding, as Paul made clear to the Hebrews, but it forms no part of the life of public prayer of the English Church. If faith and not works is what saves people, the Homily, as we have seen, neatly gets round the implication that it doesn't matter how you behave, though the logical flaws in this intellectual legerdemain are obvious to anyone concerned to notice them. In strictly theological terms, therefore, it wouldn't much matter if Portia did or did not repent doing good, but although neither good nor bad deeds theoretically counted for anything in Protestant doctrine, they certainly meant a great deal in Protestant praxis, and everything in secular life. Anyone who acted as if the law was irrelevant would be likely to come to a painful and ignominious end, though "shriving time" on the scaffold reaffirmed rather late in

¹⁴⁹ Elizabethan BCP, p. 118.

the day that faith mattered more than works (this is an important motif in *Hamlet*). Present in the play, therefore, is an uneasy tension. There is the prospect of damnation and its seeming capriciousness, constantly present in the language, and made explicit by Jessica's conversation with Gobbo about her eternal prospects. There are the continuing reverberations of Jacob's story and its intimations of this arbitrariness. There is the civic law, protecting property and the integrity of the city's commercial transactions, and ostensibly morally neutral: "My sins upon my head, I crave the law" says Shylock in asserting the separation of law and morality. Finally, there is the amorality of the plot in which bad behaviour is condoned .

The tensions among these factors are summed up in another of Portia's apparently gratuitous epigrams when she remarks on how "shines a good deed in a naughty world". Good deeds are in short supply in the world of the play, but its naughtiness is empirically and theologically well recognised, a post-lapsarian universe in which sin is endemic, and in which parents are abused in defiance of foundational morality. In the difficult teaching of Protestant soteriology, however, Shylock the beggar may fare better than his daughter. "My own flesh and blood to rebel" provokes a lewd jibe about erections, but it emphasises that Jessica's felonies are both crimes and disobedience, the blanket definition of bad behaviour which included Cordelia's angering of Lear. Shylock, as it happens, doesn't do any actual harm in the play, though this is not for want of trying, and the only crime for which he can be punished is conspiracy, precisely the charge against Lopez. "What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong" (IV.i.88) is in the context more than rhetorical, for it brings out that in the world of the play causality has no connection with justice, so Antonio expects to be killed for his magnanimity, Bassanio can lie his way into a fortune, and Jessica and her accomplices go free. The capriciousness of this moral order belongs with a theology which teaches that salvation is similarly capricious, like the consequences in the play disconnected from the merit or otherwise of what people do. The logic of such a doctrine is illustrated by the unmerited good fortune of Jacob, and provides a sombre underside of the frivolity which dominates much of the play.

Theologically aware members of early audiences would know about the lacunae and ambiguities of the "official" morality and see the link between God's preference for Jacob and the perplexing arbitrariness of salvation deduced from it. Always in the background of *The Merchant of Venice* is the savage irony that Jessica stands to be damned not for what she has done but for things over which she has no control. Shylock, regenerated by water at his christening and

by poverty, had some prospect of finding himself in the bosom of “Father Abram”, no matter how few good deeds he had to repent or lay claim to, but as the counterpart of the penitent thief and as poor as Lazarus he was not caught in the trap that Jessica and Claudio were in, of continuing to enjoy the worldly wages of their sins. The shifting perspectives of the play allow no firm conclusions, but, to return to the theme of obedience and its supposed centrality to social behaviour, it gets only extremely indirect endorsement in this play in which an apparently simple pair of plots are enacted against a disconcerting silent commentary drawing on the muddy waters of Protestant theology introduced by a Jewish character recounting an obscure story from the Old Testament.

CHAPTER 3.

“A CRUTCH TO LEANE ON IN MY SECOND INFANCIE”: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ELDERLY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND.

FILIAL OBLIGATIONS.

Lear had put paid to his intention of seeing out his days in Cordelia's “kind nursery”, but Old Gobbo was hoping to fare better, remarking of his son that “the boy was the very staff of my age, my very prop”. His language is close to that of an anonymous play of 1602 in which a comic old man admonishes his son:

Thou art a knave, although thou be my sonne,
Have I with care and trouble brought thee up,
To be a staffe and comfort to my age,
A Pillar to support me, and a Crutch
To leane on in my second infancie,
And doest thou use me thus? Thou art a knave.¹⁵⁰

Behind this complaint is the possibility that old people might be an unwelcome burden, the subject of *The Old Law* by Middleton and Rowley, a play which opens up issues about the basis and nature of family ties, and of their relationship with general moral standards.¹⁵¹ These are serious matters, but the title page describes the play as an “excellent comedy”, though “excellent” is a bit strong, and it's a comedy only in the sense of being funny in places, at least to people who don't like their humour too subtle. Technically it's a tragicomedy, with an unexpected twist at the end which means that nobody dies; but though villainy is thwarted this is no comedy of erotic renewal in a romantic “happy ending”. As we shall see, couples are reunited when they would

150 John Cooke, ed., *A Pleasant Conceited Comedie, Wherein Is Shewed How a Man May Chuse a Good Wife from a Bad*. ([Amersham], 1912), Sig., B4v.

151 It's attributed on the title page to Massinger, Middleton, and Rowley, though Massinger's contribution is now generally thought to be small or non-existent. Taylor thinks that Heywood was involved: Taylor, Gary, “Middleton and Rowley – and Heywood: *The Old Law* and new attribution technologies”, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 96, 2002, 165 – 217; the play's authorship is not important to my argument. References are to the edition by Catherine M. Shaw, NY and London, Garland, 1982.

much prefer not be, parents must confront betrayal by their children, and the ethics of the state are called into question.

Lear's initial mistake was to assume that parent-child relationships were symmetrical, the feelings and behaviour of parents towards their children replicated by those of children towards parents. This idea was not accepted without question in the early modern period when there was a widespread recognition that the love of a parent for a child was qualitatively different from that of a child for its parents, at once stronger and more predictable. That parents should love and care for their children needed little explanation, and Montaigne offered a tentative explanation of why a child's love might be less automatic than that of a parent, arguing that self-preservation was the first instinct, followed by the preservation of children:

If there be any truly-naturall law, that is to say, any instinct, universally and perpetually imprinted, both in beasts and us, (which is not without controversie) I may, according to mine opinion, say, that next to the care, which each living creature hath to his preservation, and to flie what doth hurt him; the affection which the engenderer beareth his off-spring, holds the second place in this ranke. And forasmuch as nature seemeth to have recommended the same unto-us, ayiming to extend, encrease, and advance, the successive parts or parcels of this hir frame; it is no woonder if back·againe it is not so great from children unto fathers.¹⁵²

What will become a ubiquitous concept in this study, “nature”, is here invoked to explain parental care and how it is not necessarily returned in kind. Montaigne is not, obviously, arguing that children should not care about their parents, only that it is not particularly surprising when they don't. Parental care is instinctual, in this argument, with a basis in the natural cycle of procreation which involves protecting young human beings, but no such necessity motivates children. Hence, though this not spelled out, children have to be taught their duty, with enforcement where necessary.

Young children learned what was expected of them, and, up to a point, why they must behave as they were told, but how mature adults were expected to behave towards elderly parents was much less clear. As Cordelia pointed out, marriage transformed things, and Lear's failure to recognise this caused him to end up destitute. But time also changes things, so dependency will

152 Florio's Montaigne, 192.

often reverse itself, parents who had cared for their children needing care themselves. This raised the question of if and why children might be expected to provide it. When Bolingbroke, Henry IV, is dying, he recovers briefly to realise that his heir is trying the crown on for size in the next room. The younger Henry is surprised at his father's recovery, and tells him "I never thought to hear you speak again", to which the King responds

Thy wish was father, Harry, to that thought:

I stay too long by thee, I weary thee(IHIIV, IV.v.90)

The impatient heir is proverbial, and is prominent in *The Old Law*, emblematic of the problems experienced and caused by parents nearing the end of life.

It must be uncertain how urgent an issue this was in a time when by modern standards expectation of life was modest, and responsibility for elderly parents may therefore not have been especially common.¹⁵³ Chronological age, however, was, and is, less important than functional, a callous metric but relevant here because what mattered was not how old but how frail or poor someone was, and how much support was therefore needed. In the case of incapacity the burden of support will at first have been carried by a spouse assisted by whatever could be afforded, but with the death or incapacity of that carer other sources of help would be needed, and we know little about the experience of old age in early modern societies. Laslett inferred from evidence about who lived where that old people who could afford to remained independent, but this tells us nothing about the strength or weakness of children's sense of obligation to their parents, nor how widespread it may have been.¹⁵⁴ Early modern England was a period of high migration, so many vulnerable old people will have had no children living nearby, but, to balance this, larger families would have eased the load, if such it was, by sharing it. Institutional support had probably weakened after the Reformation. Charitable legacies had traditionally included provision for the

153 A presumably trustworthy estimate of people over the age of sixty in late sixteenth century England is about seven per cent: E. A. Wrigley and Roger Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 528. Wrigley came to believe that some studies based on household reconstruction had been methodologically too crude to be altogether reliable: E. A. Wrigley, 'How Reliable Is Our Knowledge of the Demographic Characteristics of the English Population in the Early Modern Period?', *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 3 (1997): 571-95.

154 Peter Laslett, "The history of aging and the aged", in Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology*, Reprinted with corrections 1980. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 174 - 213. There has been some agreement among historians that parents were routinely cared for by children, but the subject has not received much attention: see, for example, Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family: 1450-1700* (London: Longman, 1984); Keith Thomas, *Age and Authority in Early Modern England*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

poor who prayed for their benefactor's soul in return for help, so when these prayers were forbidden, relief of the poor fell to the civic authorities, who imposed stringent conditions, with a likely growth in hardship as a result.¹⁵⁵ A census of the poor in Norwich in 1570, however, reveals that the great majority of them were people with dependent children, and the few elderly, arbitrarily defined as over fifty, mostly lived alone or with spouses. Only one was obviously dependent on his son:

John Bacon of 67 yeris, almost blynd, & doth nothings, widower, & lyveth of his son that kepe a skole, and dwelt here ever.¹⁵⁶

Elderly or infirm people relying on their children would not show up in a survey of the poor, and without information about the age distribution in the city no conclusions can be drawn from the fact that John Bacon seems to have been so unusual.

No doubt many children behaved dutifully to their parents into old age, but the nature of this duty is not self-evident. There may well have existed an unconsidered assumption that parenting was somehow contractual, that children have an obligation to care for elderly parents in return for being cared for in childhood. This idea is present in Lear's tirades about ingratitude, and in a 1581 complaint which deplores the failure of the younger generation to keep its side of the, implicit, bargain and care for the old:

Howe commeth this to passe, that they doe not love their Parents againe, neither reverence nor obey them, to whom neverthelesse they are bounde for all thinges which they have received, yea the life it selfe? ... First, the dispositions and inclinations of children are so corrupted with the faultes and sinnes of our old & great Graundfather Adam, that they more fervently desire to be beloved than their parents. ... One father with a lesse care and more chearfull minde can nourish and bring up ten children, than ten children can comfort and cherish one father: hereof it may easily be judged, how great the love and readie good will of children is to helpe their parents in their necessities. Therefore they do very foolishly, which being poore and well

155 Claire S. Schen, "Strategies of poor aged women and widows in sixteenth-century London", in L. A. Botelho and Pat Thane, eds., *Women and Aging in British Society since 1500* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 14.

156 *The Norwich Census of the Poor, 1570*, ed. by John Frederick Pound, 68. The significance "dwelt here ever" is that the civic authorities were reluctant to help newcomers to the city; not that it did John Bacon any good, because the decision in his case was "No allms".

stricken in yeares, doe looke for great aide & succour from their children¹⁵⁷

The author goes on to suggest that rather than depend on their children, the impoverished elderly should put their trust in God, a suggestion which in the context may not have been all that helpful. This particular lament cannot be taken as any sort of evidence of actual widespread neglect, for it's in the tradition of *o tempora, o mores* in which everything about the contemporary world is unsatisfactory, the result of original sin, but it is nevertheless evidence that not everyone thought all was well for vulnerable older people.

There is surprisingly little in the didactic writing of the period about responsibility for elderly parents. Cleaver's interminable book (384 pages) in which he makes free with advice on an unimaginable number of topics has only a single sentence on the topic, observing that children should “relieve, maintaine, and nourish their parents, in case they shall fall into povertie or decay”.¹⁵⁸ Pritchard is less laconic: referring to parents

... although we never can repaye like curtesies, and bestow upon them, matchable benignant benefits: yet children must indeavour as farre as lieth in them, to regradifie them, as in servyng, folowyng, and accompanyng them, in executing their willes, in patience and performance: and if they commaunde thinges unlawful, ungodly, and indecent: not to snarre or snap, quip or carp them for it: but modestly to perswade them, to the contrarie, with reformable termes, or to let it slippe, it passing with patience.¹⁵⁹

The lack of written encouragement to people to look out for their elderly parents probably indicates that there was no need to urge what everyone would expect to do without question, behaviour for which they had the frequently mentioned model in the way storks were said to care for their elderly parents. This fowl's exemplary practices put those of human beings to shame:

We read of the young stork, that he carrieth the olde upon his back, when for age he is not able

157 Barthélemy Batt, *The Christian Mans Closet : Wherein Is Contained a Large Discourse of the Godly Training up of Children: As Also of Those Duties That Children Owe Vnto Their Parents, And Nowe Englished by William Lowth* (London: 1581), 77ff.

158 Robert Cleaver and Robert Cawdry, *A Godly Forme of Housholde Gouvernment : For the Ordering of Private Families, according to the Direction of Gods Word. ...* (London: for Thomas Man, 1621), 342; the authorship and bibliographic history of this book are obscure, but do not affect my argument.

159 Thomas Pritchard, *The Schoole of Honest and Vertuous Lyfe, by T.P.* (London: R. Johnes, 1579), 32.

to fly. This is recorded of the stork to condemne us men, that will not be careful to releeve our parents, as they were careful to releeve us. God and nature, and reason, & common sence, do call upon us for this duty to parents, therefore I wil not discourse further upon it.¹⁶⁰

Storks may have been more common in early modern England than they are today, providing greater opportunity to notice that they do not, in fact, look after their parents, but the myth is an attractive one, and might suggest the existence of a norm.¹⁶¹ The final sentence invokes what will become a familiar trio of God, nature, and reason to conclude that there was no need to enlarge on the duty, which reinforces the probability that an expectation that elderly parents would look to their children for necessary help was indeed too obvious to need expressing.

THE PLAY.

There are no storks in *The Old Law* to shame the treatment of the elderly by younger generations, though it's old spouses as well as parents that are a problem. The play survives as an unsatisfactory quarto of 1656, though internal evidence puts the writing of it in the second decade of the seventeenth century.¹⁶² We don't know why it was first published nearly forty years after it was written, though someone must have thought there would be a market for an obscure play which had not been performed for decades and had no immediate prospect of a public showing. It may be that it was used to make some political point which is now forgotten. Virtually nothing is known about its early life on stage, and revivals have been rare, though a recent monograph on Middleton has a brief account of a RSC production.¹⁶³ The unkempt text has not been improved by modern editors: Shaw's 1982 version has too many obvious misprints for any confidence in its reliability, and Masten's 2007 edition is based on the view that an editor is an equal member of the team which creates a text, with predictably tendentious results.¹⁶⁴ As I could make no sense of Masten's textual notes, I shall use Shaw's edition despite its shortcomings, though I have checked

160 Lewis Thomas, *Seaven Sermons; Or, the Exercises of Seaven Sabbaths ... Together with a Short Treatise upon the Commandments ...* (London: V. Simmes, 1602), 110.

161 The origin of the myth is unclear: it is not scriptural.

162 Shaw, xvii-xx; Harbage/Schoenbaum, *Annals of English Drama*, 108, estimate c1615-1618; *Oxford Companion to Works of Thomas Middleton*, 405.

163 Michelle O'Callaghan, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist*, Renaissance Dramatists (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); a radio adaptation by Peter Barnes was broadcast in 1986.

164 Thomas Middleton, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, The Oxford Middleton (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007). Anyone who entitles a book *Textual Intercourse*, as Masten has done, must expect to be a gazingstock to women and men of goodwill. Two examples of Shaw's carelessness occur on page 36: muttom instead of mutton, windows instead of "widdowes" (page 22 of the 1656 quarto).

my quotations with the EEBO version.

The play is set in Epirus where a new ruler, Evander, with the agreement of his senate, has recently revived the old law of the title.¹⁶⁵ This is that men are to be put to death when they reach eighty, and women at sixty, because at these ages they can no longer serve the state, as men by protecting it militarily, by the wisdom of their counsel, and by breeding future generations to continue these services, and as women by doing the breeding. As not all that many people in early modern England made it to sixty, and very few men got to eighty, the law would probably have caused less consternation among early audiences than it might today (about which, see below).

None of the play's editors has any suggestion of a possible source, and have therefore presumed that the plot, and the law in question, were thought up by the playwrights, but no editor seems to have spotted a short passage by Donne who cites an unnamed country in which sons must beat to death with clubs fathers who had reached “an unprofitable, and useless age” and another in which everyone was “dispatch'd” at seventy.¹⁶⁶ The dating of both Donne's book and *The Old Law* is so uncertain that it's impossible to work out whether either was written with knowledge of the other, and it could even be that Donne's reference was to the imaginary state of Epirus. The point he is making concerns the relativity of natural law, so there's certainly overlap with the subject of the play.

As one might expect, the elderly in the early modern period were not always regarded with the respect that the wisdom acquired over the years entitled them to. A character in Castiglione's *The Courtier*, for example, comments:

the reason for this faulty judgement in the old is that the passing years rob them of many of the favourable condition of life, among other things depriving the blood of a great part of its vitality, and in consequence the physical constitution changes and then organs through which the soul exercises its powers grow feeble. ... They don't realize that ... young people nowadays are far brighter and more capable than their old men used to be.¹⁶⁷

165 Broham has made an heroic attempt to find significance in the names of the male characters (those of the female ones defeat him), but the result is not persuasive: probably the names are, mostly, Greek, or Greekish, to establish local colour, like the reference to drachmas: A. A. Bromham, ‘The significance of names in Middleton and Rowley's *The Old Law*’, *Notes and Queries*, 41 (1994), 509–12

166 John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest W. Sullivan (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 40.

167 Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by George Bull (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1967), 107 –

The idea that the human race is getting cleverer all the time is less obvious after events in the twentieth century.

Most of the younger people in *The Old Law* think that the law is a splendid idea. One group can't wait to see the back of their parents and get access to legacies, another welcomes a chance to escape from unwelcome marriages. The leader of the impatient heirs is Simonides, a courtier, who proposes to use his money to marry Eugenia, a young woman who spends much of the play having fun choosing a replacement for her husband as he approaches eighty. Also looking forward with pleasure to bereavement and remarriage is Gnotho, a resourceful clown, and the marriage market is further crowded by a number of unemployed domestic servants on the lookout for rich old widows with whom to make, as they hope, lucrative short-lived matches.

At the heart of the play is something resembling a debate about the primacy of law. Against the self-interested supporters of the law, and providing a dramatic foil to them, is Cleanthes, another courtier whose values and behaviour call theirs into question. His own marriage is a marked contrast with the fractious unions of Gnotho and of Eugenia:

We two are one,
One soul, one body, one heart, that think all one thought. (I.i.501)

Cleanthes is effusive about his father, who he hides to protect him from the law, and addressing him, enthuses about his “blessings” in lifeless blank verse:

I find 'em all in my contented peace,
And lose not one in thousands. They're dispersed
So gloriously, I know not which are brightest!
I find 'em as angels are found, by legions:
First in the love and honesty of a wife,
Which is the first and chiefest of all temporal blessings;

111; these sentences are some distant apart in the book, but the elision doesn't distort the argument.

Next in yourself, which is the hope and joy
Of all my actions, my affairs, my wishes;
And, lastly, which crowns all, I find my soul
Crowned with the peace of 'em, the eternal riches,
Man's only portion for his heavenly marriage.(IV.ii.38)

A wife, a father, and a god, are Cleanthes's blessings. None of these has much appeal to most of the other characters in the play.

The situation, then, is an idealised family standing in dramatic juxtaposition to the unidealised ones of most of the other characters. There is more, though, to *The Old Law* than a simple contrast between virtue and vice, for, in trying to protect his father, Cleanthes and his wife are breaking the law. When their scheme miscarries and his father is captured, Cleanthes is charged with treason, and the ensuing trial is an effective piece of theatre in which the play's probing of issues involving law and justice, and their relationship with the political order, becomes explicit. His judge and accuser is Simonides, whose arguments in the context are patently meretricious, but who nevertheless raises important questions of citizenship which directly impinge on family morality. Cleanthes's alleged offence is crisply put:

there's none can be
A good son and a bad subject, for if princes
Be called the people's fathers, then the subjects
Are all his sons, and he that flouts the prince
Doth disobey his father.
...
As our princes
Are fathers, so they are our sovereigns too,
And he that doth rebel against sovereignty
Doth commit treason in the height of degree.¹⁶⁸ (V.i.239)

168 There might be a reference here to political events which could provoke publication of this play in the 1650s.

Giving his relationship with his father priority over obedience to the law certainly compromises Cleanthes, for Simonides's argument, that a king was the father of his people, had undoubted force.¹⁶⁹ Some years before the play was probably written, King James had brought out *Basilikon Doron* in which he observed that

A good king ... employeth all his studie and paines, to procure and mainteine ... the well-fare and peace of his people, and (as their naturall father and kindly maister) thinketh his greatest contentment standeth in their prosperitie¹⁷⁰

Chakravorty makes a lot of this view of monarchy, arguing that it was a “familiarisation” of politics, to which *The Old Law* responds by politicising the family; but James's prose is by no means clear.¹⁷¹ “As” is ambiguous. It could indicate a simile, that the king is not in an actual paternal relationship with his subjects, but that his concern for his subjects resembles that of a father for his children. Alternatively, it could be literal, meaning that the king was acting in his capacity of father and master. The former is the more likely, for a king could hardly be a “natural” father to all his subjects, an interpretation supported by the contrast between the king as amiable parent and the venality of a “usurping tyrant” of whom the behaviour resembles that of “a step-father and an uncouth hireling” who enrich themselves at their dependants' expense.¹⁷² This distinction between a “natural” father and a stepfather implies that “as” indicates a resemblance, not that the king is in the capacity of a parent.¹⁷³

The extension of the commandment to honour one's parents into a duty of obedience has already been commented on, and is at work here in James's evocation of fatherhood when writing about a king's responsibility, and a similar elision is present in Simonides's accusation. But what if the king is a tyrant, as some accuse the Duke of Epirus of being, and the law unjust, as

169 Debora K. Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 227ff. An example of the idea's occurrence is John Harington, *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, Called The Metamorphosis of Ajax: A Critical Edition*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 132, a work of a facetious nature.

170 James, *Basilikon Dōron, Or, His Maiesties Instructions to His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince*. (Edinburgh: R. Waldegrave, 1603), 29.

171 Swapan Chakravorty, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). By “familiarization” (sic) he must mean associating politics with the nature of family relationships, not making them well known, which is the usual modern meaning of the word.

172 *Basilikon Dōron*, p. 30.

173 See A. Schmidt, *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971) (first published as *Shakespeare-Lexicon* in 1902), 54 -56. H. H. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), 31 – 34 discusses early twentieth century usage.

Cleanthes has argued (I.i.485)? It would not follow that any offence would necessarily be mitigated, for the Homily on obedience is clear that subjects' obedience is unconditional, and that it's not up to them to decide on the justice of a ruler, but to accept the judgements that are handed down whatever they may privately think of them. The Homilist accepts that "experience testifieth of good and evill Princes", but this is no excuse for rebellion:

What shall Subiects doe then? shall they obey valiant, stout, wise, and good Princes, and contemne, disobey, and rebell against children being their Princes, or against undiscreet and evill governours? God forbid

There may sometimes be unjust rulers, but when they do occur it's most likely the subjects' fault:

But what if the Prince be undiscreete, and evill indeed, and is also evident to all mens eyes, that hee so is? I aske againe, what if it be long of the wickednesse of the Subiects, that the Prince is undiscreete and evill?

Subjects are in any case not qualified to judge such things, and if the occasional ruler is evil, punishment can safely be left to God and not attempted by citizens, in whom rebellion is far worse than even the worst ruler:

For first what a perilous thing were it to commit unto the Subiects the judgement which Prince is wise and godly, and his governement good, and which is otherwise: as though the foot must judge of the head: an enterprise very heinous, and must needs breed rebellion. For who else be they that are most inclined to rebellion, but such haughtie spirits? From whom springeth such foule ruine of Realmes? Is not rebellion the greatest of all mischiefes? And who are most ready to the greatest mischiefes, but the worst men? Indeede a rebell is worse then the worst prince, and rebellion worse then the worst governement of the worst prince that hitherto hath beene.¹⁷⁴

The Homily dates from early in Elizabeth's reign, but was probably still familiar when *The Old Law* was written. It was originally directed at anyone who might be thinking about taking up

¹⁷⁴ Ronald B. Bond, ed., *Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547) ; And, A Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570)* : (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

arms against the government, something more desperate than anything that happens in the play, but Cleanthes is nevertheless charged not with a minor infringement of the law but with treason, against which family loyalty is no defence.

A SHAKESPEAREAN PARALLEL.

Simonides's aphorism, that “there's none can be a good son and a bad subject”, has, therefore, considerable authority behind it, though in the dramatic context his unwavering amorality vitiates its force, and it can't be taken as an endorsement for the idea that a citizen's unquestioning obedience to the law is the prime virtue. But it raises a more general question of some importance: the relative claims of loyalty and affection, respectively moral and emotional, to family over other demands. The dilemma is worked through with some subtlety in *Richard III*, in which an undoubted tyrant is nevertheless the king, with means of persuasion available to him to reinforce his claims for loyalty as monarch. The episode is about the dealings of Lord Stanley. With Richmond's rebellion underway, Stanley asks permission to leave the court, a request which Richard treats with justified suspicion, and despite Stanley's assurance that “I never was nor ever will be false”, Richard requires that he leaves behind his son, George Stanley, as hostage with the threat

Look your heart be firm,
Or else his head's assurance is but frail. (IV.iv.493)

As the two sides in dramatic symmetry prepare for the battle, Richard and Richmond both send to Stanley for his support, Richard requiring it

lest his son George fall
Into the blind cave of eternal night. (V.iv.40)

Stanley then goes to see Richmond to explain his dilemma. The visit is recorded in the chronicle, but what was said is not, and the scene, therefore, was imagined by Shakespeare. Stanley is greeted with a more kindly reference to night,

All comfort that the dark night can afford

Be to thy person (V.iv.59)

Most improbably in a council of war, Richmond's first concern is about his mother, to whom Stanley is married. The family connection is further emphasised as Stanley explains why he cannot openly side with Richmond,

Lest, being seen thy brother, tender George

Be executed in his father's sight. (V.iv.74)

The play follows the historical record, so there is bleak comedy in Richard of all people supposing that to hold a family member hostage would be effective, since family ties in the play count for little. The king condemned his brother Clarence to death, and when Clarence was reprieved, another brother, Richard, had him murdered, and then went on to murder his nephews. Richard had earlier brushed aside the importance of family affection when he took it for granted that it could easily be overcome in the wooing of Lady Anne whose family loyalty might be expected to make him anathema to her. The deaths of Clarence and the king will

leave the world for me to bustle in.

For then I'll marry Warwick's youngest daughter -

What though I killed her husband and her father? (I.i.151)

He is quickly proved right. Loyalty to husband and father is easily forgotten when Lady Anne succumbs to Richard's parody of Petrarchan courtship.

The conversation between Richmond and Stanley, therefore, mingling as it does military tactics and exchanges of family affection, is in contrast to the portrayal of family relationships which have dominated the play up to this point. Despite insisting on the need for brevity in the face of imminent battle, Stanley nevertheless manages to assert the importance of family ties, and even their superiority over political ones:

Farewell. The leisure and the fearful time
Cuts off the ceremonious vows of love
And ample interchange of sweet discourse
Which so long-sundered friends should dwell upon.
God give us leisure for these rites of love. (V.iv.76)

The “real” Lord Stanley, however, had other priorities, and in Holinshed's account was quite prepared to sacrifice his son George:

The lord Stanlies bold answer to K. Richards pursuent, he had more sonnes alive; and as to come to him he was not then so determined.¹⁷⁵

The King's response to this insouciant defiance was to order the death of the hostage son, but in both the chronicle and the play was persuaded to postpone killing the boy as there was more pressing business at hand. In the play, the battle over, the new king's first question concerns the welfare of young Stanley: one would expect him to have more urgent things to worry about.

The brief prominence of Stanley at the end of the play serves to highlight the contrasting attitudes of Richard and Richmond, and to imply that in the new political order family affection will have a privilege denied it in the régime about to be replaced. There could also be another explanation for making Stanley's behaviour if not exactly principled at least morally defensible, that of a man caught in a cruel dilemma. Forced to choose between conflicting loyalties, he took the course that did least damage. His neutrality was no doubt sensible, though certainly not heroic, but Shakespeare's emphasis on the strength of family ties at the basis of the dilemma places it in a different moral register from the opportunism of Holinshed's account. The Stanley of the play is placed in a better light than his actual behaviour on the day warranted. The devoted father doing his best for his son and his stepson is a very different person from the character in Holinshed who decides at the crucial moment that he has plenty more sons and throws his weight behind Richmond. The reason for this whitewash is most likely unedifying. There is a good chance that *Richard III* was first put on by a theatre company of which the patron was a descendent of the historical Lord Stanley.¹⁷⁶ It is widely accepted that the play is, among other

175 Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicle as Used in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Dent, 1955), 172.

176 E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The Lost Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 64 – 4 is the

things, an exercise in Tudor propaganda, so just as it would do no harm to a playwright who was just starting out to show the ruling dynasty in a good light, so portraying the ancestors of a theatrical patron as behaving better than they actually did might be sensible. Shakespeare had a living to earn. But if the history was indeed adjusted a century later to please a patron, it would indicate the emotional hold that membership of a family was and is capable of even when there is no personal contact, an example of the conceptual understanding of family I mentioned in Chapter 1.

JUSTICE AND NATURE.

There is much of Richard in Simonides, both characters whose villainy is tempered by wit, and both unconcerned about family loyalty, and there are similarities between the dilemmas of Stanley and of Cleanthes, each caught between the competing demands of family and of political obedience. Whether the Duke of Epirus is a tyrant is left intriguingly unresolved, though there is little direct criticism of him. When Simonides's father is going as he supposes to his death, he sarcastically comments “tis noble justice”, and his wife retorts “tis cursed tyranny” (II.i.159), but the most cogent denunciation of the duke comes from a comic figure singularly without any moral authority. This is Gnotho. He has spent the play arranging to hand over his wife, Agatha, to the law, and to marry a gullible young woman he has his eye on, and to do this he has needed to make his wife appear older than she is. To achieve this he has shown a parish clerk how to tamper with the register and then bribed him to do it. He is understandably piqued, therefore, to find out that he's been wasting his time, for the law is not real, merely a device by a ruler to test the ethical calibre of his subjects. Immediately after this has become known to the rest of the characters, a grotesque procession appears, led by Gnotho, planning to drop Agatha off to be executed and to continue on his way to church to marry her successor. Realising that the old people have not actually been killed, that his ingenuity has been unavailing, and that nobody is going to hang Agatha, Gnotho achieves a certain dignity as he protests about being misled by the law and about its unfairness:

Your grace had been more kind to your young subjects. Heaven bless and mend your laws that

most convinced exponent of the Stanley link; Terence G. Schoone-Jongen, *Shakespeare's Companies: William Shakespeare's Early Career and the Acting Companies, 1577-1594* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008) demurs; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) and Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) are non-committal.

they do not gull your poor countrymen. . . . But I am not the first by forty that has been undone by the law; 'tis but a folly to stand upon terms. I take leave of your grace, as well as mine eyes will give me leave. I would they had been asleep in their beds when they opened 'em to see this day. Come, Ag., come Ag. (V.i.594)

Gnotho's "undone by the law" could apply to most of the characters in the play, and springing the tragicomic ending resolves none of its moral issues. The Duke rewards the virtuous Cleanthes and his wife, but are we supposed to admire his wisdom, or be appalled by his manipulation of the lives and emotions of his subjects and the damage it has done? Gnotho and Eugenia must go back to the spouses whose deaths they had sought, and these spouses are stuck with people who wished them dead. Simonides's parents who believed he had done his best to protect his father must now accept that he did not, and the parents of other courtiers are likewise disabused. The unemployed servants are back in work, but they have all acquired elderly wives who presumably took them in good faith, and may have got the best of the bargain, but have been courted for mercenary not romantic reasons. Relationships which were at least serviceable have been exposed in all their imperfections. The bitterness is glossed over but cannot be missed.

THE CHURCH BOOK.

Two questions emerge from the chaotic ending. One concerns the place of religion in family morality. During his trial, Cleanthes had to respond to the accusation of treason for having resisted the law, and to Simonides's interpretation of it as having behind it the authority of political absolutism which effectively claimed infallibility for the monarch. Cleanthes looks to a superior, or anyway a different, ethic,

The common law of reason and of nature.

He has prayed that

Heaven stand on my side! Pity, love and duty,

and warned his accusers of their future appearance at "the judgement seat", to make answer for

The heaviest crimes that ever made up
Unnaturalness in humanity. (V.i.259)

Gnotho had early on introduced an unsettling religious note to the comedy. He refers to the parish register which he is having forged to make his wife appear older than she is as the “church book”, a bureaucratic record which is kept in the parish church. “Church book” however, can also mean the Bible in the play, as when Cleanthes uses the phrase in arguing that the new law goes against scriptural teaching:

The church-book overthrows it, if you read it well.

So although the church-book as the parish record is referred to frequently as evidence of the ages of characters, for each such reference there is an ambiguity which sets divine law as revealed in scripture against human law which may be seen as tyranny.

As well as this recurring ambiguity, the play has an unmistakable Christian referent. This is shown, for instance, in occasional biblical language, such as when Cleanthes calls his father “a man of sorrows”.¹⁷⁷ The religious allusion is clearest in the description of the retreat where the elderly lived after their supposed deaths:

A place at hand we were all strangers in;
So sphered about with music, such delights,
Viands, and attendance, and, once a day
So cheered with a royal visitant,
That ofttimes waking, our unsteady phantasies
Would question whether we yet lived or no,
Or had possession of that paradise
Where angels be the guard.

¹⁷⁷ *Isaiah*, LIII: 3, but Christian by appropriation.

The references are to the expulsion from the garden of Eden. The daily visitant is a reminder of one “walking in the garden in the cool of the day”, and to be dragged back from this paradise to the daily life of Epirus recalls the departure from the garden when cherubim with “a flaming sword” prohibited return.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, the world they are returning to is that of the post-lapsarian family, in which one of the first recorded incidences was a brother's murder, for, in Epirus, family relationships have been exposed as sites of heartless betrayal, the necessary civilities of domestic life stripped away, moral structures destroyed and basic loyalties shown to be illusory. The old law of the play's title has created moral dereliction

The second question concerns the theme of this chapter: why should people protect their parents when there is, according to Montaigne, no biological necessity to do so, and when a child's interests may be in seeing the back of them to inherit their wealth? If the ending is not an assertion of Christian principles, but an image of a world in which most human dealings are tainted by the Fall, which the well-documented morose Protestantism of Middleton would have it that it is, what is there to rely on?¹⁷⁹ Early in the play, Cleanthes and Simonides talk about their parents using a metaphor of trees, a comparison which is the basis of the identical image which demonstrated the one-way passage of parental affection that I used at the start of this study:

but what is the cause, that the love of the Father is more effectually, then the childes good will to the Father? the reason is, ... Because the roote shall sooner rotte, then the branch shall send backe its influence unto it.¹⁸⁰

Two metaphors are then developed. For Simonides, a tree keeps the sun away from young plants and stops their growth, so a father is a hindrance. Cleanthes sees the parental tree as offering protection from “the bleak air of storms” (I.i.80), and he later develops the organic image of how the “kind roof” of a tree distributes life to its children who are its “glorious fruits”, and they in turn gratefully sustain the “cold limbs in fruitless winter” (I.i.345). This recognition that gratitude is the reason for looking after elderly parents is in line with Cordelia's response to Lear, making it a moral act, the result of choice rather than impulse. In support of this expression of gratitude was the behaviour of Aeneas who, in the words of *The Old Law*

178 *Genesis*, IV: 8; III; 24.

179 Samuel Schoenbaum, *Middleton's Tragedies: A Critical Study*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

180 W. Averell, *A Dyall for Dainty Darlings, Rockt in the Cradle of Securitie A Glasse for All Disobedient Sonnes to Looke In. ...* (Imprinted at London: for Thomas Hackette, 1584).

... took his bedrid father on his back,
And with the sacred load, to him no burden,
Hewed his way through blood, through fire, through
Even all the armed streets of bright-burning Troy,
Only to save a father. (V.i.224ff)

References to Aeneas's filial piety are frequent, though it should be added that in rescuing his father he lost his wife, which, as he was telling his story to Dido, was perhaps not inconvenient.¹⁸¹

In a complex meditation, Cleanthes confronts the frequent insufficiency of any natural impulse to care for parents, because, to pick up his earlier image, people are not trees, and relationships with parents are subject to mediation of a deliberate, intentional, sort. Invoking the “law ... of nature” and “innaturalness” is a rhetorical device in the trial, but elsewhere Cleanthes acknowledges that nature is an uncertain agency:

Nature, as thou art old,
If love and justice be not dead in thee,
Make some the pattern of thy piety
Lest all do turn unnaturally against thee,
And thou be blamed for our oblivions
And brutish reluctations.¹⁸² (I.i.356)

The contradictoriness of nature is brought out by the antitheses of “some” and “all”, and of the human and the animal. It is at once a model for piety and the source of moral obliviousness. It can, in other words, inspire both gratitude and indifference towards parents.

A gloss on this unsteady quality of nature is provided by a comment on Cleanthes's wife

181 The story is found in *The Aeneid*, Book II. It is mentioned twice in Shakespeare's plays: *JC*, I.ii.112ff; *2H6*, V.11.62f.

182 “Reluctation” is given four definitions by the OED, none of which exactly works here: some sense of moral shortcoming is meant.

Hippolita. Their perfect marriage has already been described as having their individualities merged into one, so the wife is as active as her husband in seeking to protect Cleanthes's father from the law. This causes the old man mild surprise, as she is not related by blood to him, and he compares her behaviour with that of Simonides and the rest who are happy to sacrifice parents with whom they *are* connected by blood:

That the strong tie of wedlock should do more
Than nature to her dearest ligaments
Of blood and propagation! ...
A daughter-in-law? Law were above nature
Were there more such children. (I.i.401)

The play on words over “law” is a quibble of some importance. Law as legislation is contrasted with law as contract, its public sense with the private, but more significantly it establishes that there may be stronger bonds in a family than those of the blood relationship. Affinity, in other words, may be a stronger “ligament” than kindred.

This uncertain quality of nature as a bond in families is the origin of the play's central irony, because the admired daughter-in-law is the involuntary agent of the betrayal and capture of Leonides, her father-in-law. This comes about because her cousin Eugenia is looking forward with pleasure to the death of her husband, now in his eightieth year. In anticipation of imminent widowhood, Eugenia has a frank talk with her step-daughter, to the effect that a sensible woman will marry an old man so as to be rich enough to have all the young men she wants when he's dead. At this point Hippolita appears and since it's necessary to keep up appearances, Eugenia puts on a show of grief at her husband's imminent execution, which the audience knows to be entirely insincere, but takes in her cousin. Hippolita is overwhelmed with feminine sympathy, and assuming she can trust her cousin *because* she is a kinswoman reveals to her how she and her husband are protecting Leonides. This turns out to be a mistake. As soon as the secret is out, Cleanthes appears and sees it as his responsibility to criticise the morals of his “kindred” Eugenia, calling her a strumpet, whore, shameless, impudently common, and un-Christian (III,ii, 295). These strictures are not taken in good part, and to get back at him Eugenia passes on the information about the whereabouts of his father to Simonides. It has been given out that the old

man is dead, but on the basis of Eugenia's information he is captured and led away to death.

It will be clear that the interest of this play lies in its very lack of any cogent philosophy. There is an undertone of Christian reference, but it is tentative and allusive, and it's also possible to make out another recurring idea which further muddles any moral clarity that might be there. This concerns the nature of bereavement. That excessive grief was not sensible or beneficial was well known:

Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive grief the enemy of the living.¹⁸³

It was also accepted that for many, possibly most, people, grief is not always unmitigated. Thus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony, on hearing of his wife Fulvia's death describes how his response combined feelings of both regret and pleasure, unpleasantly described by Enobarbus in this way:

This grief is crowned with consolation, your old smock brings forth a new petticoat, and indeed the tears live in an onion that should water this sorrow. (I.ii.194)

Simonides's pleasure as he prepares to enjoy his inheritance is without a trace of such ambivalence, but it can nevertheless be seen as a shameless expression of what a lot of people feel. Similarly, a young wife, deprived of sexual satisfaction and required to minister to her elderly husband's infirmity with "spoonmeat" and warm slippers (II.i.7), might understandably not be too upset by the prospect of widowhood with its promise of financial security and the chance to look for a younger, virile, new husband. When Simonides is consoling his mother on her imminent widowhood by offering to fix her up with "a courtier of nineteen", her response to his thoughtfulness is

Away, unnatural! (II.i.122)

This could be played with arch amusement to show her pleasure at the prospect, though it's unlikely that it was written with such an interpretation in mind, but here *The Old Law* at least nods towards a recognition that Simonides is not uniquely callous. His offer to find his mother a

183 *All's Well*, I.i.55: there's a probable pun on right/rite (cf II.iv.42).

young lover draws on the stock comic figure of the randy widow, but behind the stereotype is the reality that bereavement involves losses that may have to be made good. I shall return to this theme when discussing remarriage in Chapter 7.

TRAGI-COMEDY OR BATHOS.

The Old Law has had its admirers. Charles Lamb (1773 – 1834) found much to respect in the play, which he thought was mainly by Massinger:

There is an exquisiteness of moral sensibility, making one to gush tears of delight, and a poetical strangeness in all the improbable circumstances of this wild play, which are unlike anything in the dramas which Massinger wrote alone. The pathos is of a subtler edge. Middleton and Rowley, who assisted in this play, had both of them finer geniuses than their associate.¹⁸⁴

Middleton's Victorian editor, Bullen, also thought the play an “excellent comedy”, and the conclusion “the drollest of all drolleries”.¹⁸⁵ In the twentieth century, its stock fell. Rowe, for example, got himself into a great taking about the play, finding in Simonides

without doubt one of the most depraved characters in all of Renaissance drama, and he never changes during the course of the play.¹⁸⁶

The law of Epire is

one of the most shocking situations in all Renaissance drama. As a result, all conventionally positive comic values become negative ones.¹⁸⁷

All this leads to stern conclusions:

184 Lamb, Charles, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, Volume One, ed. William Macdonald, *The Works of Charles Lamb*, Vol. IX (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1903), 320.

185 Thomas Middleton, *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, The English Dramatists (London: Nimmo, 1885).

186 George E. Rowe, *Thomas Middleton and the New Comedy Tradition*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 192.

187 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Moral judgements have gotten completely out of hand in Epire. All traditional values and institution are sacrificed on the altar of youth.¹⁸⁸

The superlatives reach a climax with calling Simonides “one of the most depraved characters in ... one of the most shocking situations in all Renaissance drama”, which suggests limited knowledge of the competition.

Schoenbaum, his normal sense of humour in abeyance, found the play morally chaotic, which he attributed to its joint authorship. At its heart is Middleton's bleak vision of “an inexorable universe in which frailty and evil ... bring equal ruin upon themselves”¹⁸⁹ He dismissed the “superfluous” last act as the work of Rowley, a sentimental and “meaningless turnabout made fashionable by Fletcherian tragicomedy”, which undermines “Middleton's conception of a mercilessly just universe”. The tendency here is to allow literary evaluation to be crowded out by moralising, and this is characteristic of much of what has been written about *The Old Law*, a concentration on the ethics of the play rather than on whether they are explored or even depicted with any competence. Heinemann, for example, observed that

The good characters are those who follow conscience and natural law, defying the unjust and unnatural law laid down by the state.¹⁹⁰

Bromham saw the play in similar terms, with good and bad characters, who he labeled as “selfish” and “irresponsible”, and he seemed to regard the whole almost as a parable, a tale with a message:

The Old Law suggests that the personal, familial obligation is superior to the political.¹⁹¹

188 Ibid., p. 194.

189 Samuel Schoenbaum, *Middleton's Tragedies*, 12. Schoenbaum was an example of an exceptionally rare breed, a writer who can reduce a reader to helpless laughter in a book of serious scholarship; his response to *The Old Law* is, therefore, puzzling.

190 Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

191 A. A. Bromham, ‘The Contemporary Significance of The Old Law’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24 (1984), 327–39; this at p. 331. Broham has continued to write about the play, but has published nothing relevant to my concerns.

A play that can annoy people more than three centuries after it was written must be about more than the rights and wrongs of the characters in it, and indeed it does touch on issues of broader significance. Most important is how morality and law relate to one another. The Homily on obedience was clear that a person's private conscience was irrelevant, and that duly constituted authority must be obeyed. This was Simonides's argument, but he was in the agreeable position that the law, his personal interests, and his private morals were in convenient alignment. In early modern England, however, there were large numbers of people whose consciences were at odds with their duty as citizens, most notably in matters of religion. The play, moreover, was written at a time when social and economic change, however understood, was starting to build towards the tension that led to civil war, and some, perhaps many, people were therefore losing the sense that the law and their individual interests necessarily coincided. The belated publication of the play was at a time when order had been restored, but when the state had yet to find ways of accommodating the rights of personal conscience, so it had perhaps acquired new resonance.

In early modern England, though, the law was not much involved in family relationships. The Church regulated sexual behaviour and oversaw the basic moral training of children, but there were few legal requirements and no compulsion about how to treat the elderly. Even at a time when law and morality were no longer everywhere seen as the same thing, therefore, there were never going to be many occasions when people had to choose between obeying the law and protecting family relationships, so the law which Cleanthes was breaking may have appeared too silly to cause audiences much difficulty. This was the view of Asp, who recognised the play's enigmatic qualities; but argued that the humour is crucial to its meaning. She saw the law as so self-evidently absurd that nobody in the audience could have imagined that things were going to end unhappily, for “the basis for a tragic ending does not exist”.¹⁹² In this interpretation, Evander's “benevolent designs” are apparent to the audience but not to the characters in the play. This sets up an ironical triangle in which one member is ignorant of what the other two know, this ignorance in effect commenting on itself, for the true nature of the action is understood as it happens by the knowing members, in this case the audience. The excitable response to the play by some twentieth century commentators would be anachronistic according to this reading, but if later readers who know how the play is going to end can be outraged by it, this must undermine the idea that the play is an essentially light-hearted comedy of manners.

¹⁹² Carolyn Asp, *A Study of Thomas Middleton's Tragicomedies*. (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), 143; I see nothing benevolent in the duke's social experiment. .

Whether or not the “happy” ending is an artistic failure, or anyway entirely predictable, an audience would still have had much to think about. If Asp is right, and tragedy was never on the cards because of the absurdity of the law, it would mean that this awareness that it was all a bit off fun would be concurrent with the action, giving a sustained ironic commentary on how characters comically misunderstood what was going on. Schoenbaum's conclusion, by contrast, would make this thinking retrospective as the sudden “turnabout” forces a reconsideration of all that had happened. An audience revolted by Simonides's behaviour and then realising how self-defeating it had been would think differently of it. Above all, though, audiences were confronted by how a rising generation responded to the previous one, legally defined as superfluous by the old law, raising uncomfortable questions in the world in which this superfluosity may be perceived even if it's not defined. “Age is unnecessary” says Lear abandoned by his daughters, and another frail old man living independently of his children was the historian John Rushworth, his decline described by Aubrey who told how he “hath quite lost his memory with drinking brandy. Remembred nothing of you, etc. His landlady wiped his nose like a child”. He died at the age of 83 in 1690 “at the widow Bayley's house, a good woman and who was very carefull and tendfull of him”. He had three or four daughters. “He had forgot his children before he died”.¹⁹³ Aubrey was a gossip not a sociologist (though the two activities have a fair bit in common), but this anecdote is a reminder of how little we know of the experiences of old people in the past, and of a society in which a senile man could depend on a “good ... carefull and tendfull” woman more than on his daughters (Aubrey made no reference to sons). Simonides may not have been short of audience sympathy in his final discomfiture.

To return to the dutiful treatment of the older generations by storks, this was, to use a concept of which Montaigne was rightly cautious, instinctive, part of what it was to be a stork, not something that had been learned. It was natural, and Cleanthes attributes the impulse to care for his father to nature, while acknowledging how unreliable this impulse and its basis in nature both are. His wife protects her father in law, prompting his comment that law, meaning affinity, is as potent as nature which forms the basis of a convoluted piece of reasoning about family morality in general. Hippolita mistakes the quality of kinship when she trusts her cousin because they are kindred, a relationship which turns out not to be binding on the cousin. The virtuous give priority to the moral claims of kinship, the non-virtuous find protection from law in disregarding these claims. In the background are uncomfortable intimations of the ambivalence of bereavement, a

¹⁹³ Aubrey, John, *Brief Lives and Other Selected Writings*, ed. Anthony Powell (London: The Cresset Press, 1949), 108.

hint that Simonides and his friends are merely shameless about what many people more discreetly experience on the death of a parent. *The Old Law* is too feeble a vehicle to do much with these issues, though it is challenging enough to invite its audience to ask itself what it is laughing about. As to whether people should care for their elderly parents, the play's "message" could be summed up as clearly they should, but that it's not too heinous if they manage to wriggle out of it. To take this further, and to attempt to make more sense of nature and its part in family morality, I turn now to an altogether superior play, *King Lear*.

CHAPTER FOUR.

“LET THEM ANATOMISE REGAN”: THE ENIGMA OF *KING LEAR*.

THE PLAY.

Apart from a few dissenting voices, notably Tolstoy's, *King Lear* has been generally recognised as Shakespeare's supreme achievement.¹⁹⁴ It was written in 1605 or 1606, and has come down to us as a quarto, Q, dated 1608 on the title page, and from the first Folio of 1623 (F); there are significant differences between the two versions.¹⁹⁵ My discussion is based on F, though I have at all points compared it with Q, as will become apparent. The main plot was derived from Holinshed and from an earlier dramatic version of the story, *The History of King Leir*, published in 1605 but certainly written much earlier.¹⁹⁶ The play's artistic stature makes it difficult to write about, and this chapter is intended merely as an attempt to explore one small thread of thought running through it about family relationships and their moral basis. So although the literature on the play is copious, it is relatively manageable on the object of my focus,

THE DESTRUCTION OF TWO FAMILIES.

The plot of *King Lear* is a narrative of two families destroying themselves. At the end of the play only two of Lear's sons-in-law survive from his family, Gloucester and one of his sons are also dead, and the carnage has dragged down the Fool, Oswald and a number of other servants, as well as soldiers killed in a war caused by a family quarrel. This plot is largely of Shakespeare's making, since in Holinshed and *Leir* Cordelia survives and prospers, and her death in *King Lear* is therefore the most important change Shakespeare made to his source material. Cordelia's death has long seemed to many audiences and readers to be arbitrary and dramatically contrived. Dr Johnson found her death

194 Leo Tolstoy, “Shakespeare and the Drama”, in Oswald LeWinter, ed., *Shakespeare in Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 219 – 37.

195 Gary Taylor and Michael (Michael J.) Warren, eds., *The Division of the Kingdoms : Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). All references are to *The Tragedy of King Lear*, edited by J. L. Halio, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

196 Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicle ...*, ed. Alardyce and Josephine Nicoll, (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1955), 225 – 227; R. Warwick Bond, ed., *The History of King Leir, 1605*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). The best account of the sources of the play and Shakespeare's use of them is still Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources* (London: Methuen, 1957), 141ff.

contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles.¹⁹⁷

The process of the destruction and the violence are started by Lear. His rejection of Cordelia is in comparatively measured, quasi-judicial, language:

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 for ever.

Then follows a brutal simile to bring out the extent of the King's new found hatred of his own flesh and blood:

The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and reliev'd
As thou my sometime daughter. (I.i.114)

By the end of the first scene of *King Lear*, therefore, the ruin of the King's family is well under way, begun by his own actions, its domestic unity broken up, its basis repudiated. Physical violence soon follows, also started by Lear. He has struck Goneril's gentleman for "chiding of his fool", and then strikes Oswald, presumably the same gentleman, on stage, abetted by Kent. Lear and his hundred knights have billeted themselves on Goneril, where their behaviour provokes her to remonstrate that Lear's knights are

Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold,

197 Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson. Vol.8, Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1968), 702 - 5.

That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust
Make it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a graced palace.¹⁹⁸ (I.iv.167)

Lear's response is a terrible curse in which he wishes sterility and a blighted life on his own daughter:

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 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.
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;
Turn all her mother's pains and benefit
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel -
That she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child. (I.iv.230)

The cruelty of this is probably unequalled in drama, and it's not only his daughter that Lear is cursing, for his own lineage, his grandchildren, are included in the curse. Two daughters have been repudiated in the most intemperate language, and Regan soon joins them.

198 Q has "great" palace: "graced" perhaps has connotations different from just magnificence.

The emotional aggression is not alleviated by erotic love interest, for *King Lear* is a play almost without any. A small exception is the happy marriage of Regan, an irony brought out by the grotesque tenderness of her husband's referring to "my Regan", spoken as the storm gathers.¹⁹⁹ Cordelia's feelings for her husband are never mentioned, but Goneril and Albany don't get on, and she is an adulteress, or so her sister supposes, and is certainly intending to be. Edmund's amorous schemes turn out to be fatal, though not without an element of black humour, as with his chivalric response to receiving a favour from Goneril, "Yours in the ranks of death", promptly put in context when he confides to the audience:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? one? or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd,
If both remain alive: to take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril;
And hardly shall I carry out my side,
Her husband being alive. (V.i.43)

So the comic potential of the triangle comes to nothing as mutual jealousy kills both women and love, such as it is, dies with them. For all that, though, Edmund can conclude:

Yet Edmund was beloved:
The one the other poison'd for my sake,
And after slew herself. (V.ii.213)

It is not easy to think of another English play in which a family destroys itself so completely, nor in which the destructive process is so autonomous. The plots unfold cogently as the moral and affectional bonds holding the families together break down under pressure from emotions like anger and envy, but there is no master-mistress hand behind the calamity, no Iago making trouble, no Lady urging her husband on to regicide.²⁰⁰ Only Edmund has a coherent idea

199 Echoed at the end in Lear's "my Cordelia".

200 "Master-mistress" is found in Sonnet 20.

of what he wants at the start of the play, and although Lear and his family get caught up in Edmund's plots, he is initially concerned only with his brother.²⁰¹ Yet by the end of the second act, Lear has become homeless, and is then forced to abandon even his temporary refuge because “his daughters seek his death”, and discord is brewing between his sons-in-law. All this comes about adventitiously as events run out of control, for there's no suggestion that Lear's daughters at first intended him any harm, nor that they were not prepared to put up with the inconvenience of accommodating him: even Cornwall's first intervention, though only in F, is to try to calm Lear down.

Running through the action is a thread of inexplicability, starting with Lear's division of his kingdom. But why could not Cordelia tell her father she loved him until it was too late? Why was Kent so offensive to Oswald and later to Regan and Cornwall? Where did Lear's knights go? What was the point of blinding Gloucester? Why didn't Edmund countermand his order for the death of Lear and Cordelia sooner? The death of Cordelia, in short, is not the only arbitrary event in a play that proceeds by seemingly motiveless or at least unexplained occurrences, with the only organising intelligence belonging to the malevolent characters, mainly Edmund and Cornwall.

This apparent randomness of plot is reflected by the fact that for much of the play neither of the two unprepossessing old men who are its tragic heroes understands what is going on. Gloucester is deliberately misled by Edmund, and Lear can see no further than his daughters' supposed ingratitude, but both know they are in trouble, and look for explanations. Gloucester is the object of intentional and planned malice, the victim of direct physical violence inflicted by individuals, so he is destroyed by coherent policy in a way that Lear, at least to start with, is not. What Gloucester is dealing with, therefore, is not difficult to understand: his son's unscrupulous acquisitiveness working to achieve specific ends. Almost from the first, though, Gloucester thinks metaphysically, that the world is going to the dogs in ways that were predictable from astrology, so that , confronted with Edgar's supposed treachery he finds portents in “these late eclipses in the sun and moon”, which foreshadow a world in which

love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. (I.ii.94)

201 The spelling of his name is inconsistent so I have standardised it as Edmund, and by the same process his father is Gloucester.

Later he shifts his explanation from planetary influence to divine cruelty:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.

They kill us for their sport.²⁰² (IV.i.36)

This habit of mind continues and he refers constantly to the gods, though his renewed quest for meaning starts immediately after Cornwall has put out his eyes and he learns the truth, supplied by Regan, that it is Edmund and not his brother who hates him:

O my follies! then Edgar was abused.

Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him. (III.vii.90)

Edgar is now a “loyal and natural boy”, and they make their way together towards Dover, though Gloucester doesn't know who his companion is, and is kept in ignorance long after there is any point to it.

Gloucester's list of what's going wrong in society is a prescient survey of what is soon to happen in the play, and has a noticeable resemblance to the speech on order that Ulysses delivers to the Greek council on why the war is not going better (I owe this point to Bald).²⁰³ Audiences would make the connection, and recognise the similarities: weak or non-existent leadership, caused in Lear's case by his abdication, divided counsels resulting in discord.²⁰⁴ But neither Lear nor Gloucester looks to any political explanation for their personal troubles, albeit these are acted out against a background of gathering civil and later international war set off by an abdication. Cordelia, improbably leading an army, disclaims political reasons for her presence:

202 Gloucester's *sententia* recalls the killing of a “poor, harmless fly” against which Titus initially protests in *Titus Andronicus* (III, ii, 51ff), an insect with a father and mother making people merry with “his pretty buzzing melody”. Titus's “O, O, O!” in this episode are recalled by Lear's “O,O,O,O” at (the Quarto) V.iii,301.

203 R. C. Bald, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess: Edmund and renaissance free-thought”, in James Gilmer McManaway, Giles E. Dawson, and Edwin E. Willoughby, eds., *Joseph Quincy Adams : Memorial Studies*: (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), 337 - 349.

204 Craig, however, argues that Lear's abdication was a statesmanly action to ensure an orderly succession: Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

No blown ambition doth our arms incite,

But love, dear love, and our aged father's right (IV.iii.27)

She does not explain what this right is, for her father is in no state to reclaim his throne, and she attributes her sisters' behaviour to personal not political factors:

Had you not been their father, these white flakes

Had challenged pity of them. (IV.vi.30)

This serves to underline the dominant importance of the failure in personal relationships, rather than in the social order more generally, and to locate these at the heart of the tragedy.

Macbeth and Othello believe in some sort of god. Gloucester's gods are the pagan deities of antiquity, and Lear also invokes them when cursing Cordelia: Hecate, Apollo, and Jupiter, though he doesn't accord them the explanatory powers that Gloucester does, but uses them only for rhetorical emphasis ("blind Cupid" to which he later refers seems to be a sign outside a brothel rather than the god of love). Lear's understanding of what is happening changes towards the end of the play, but for much of it he sees himself as experiencing the "thwart disnatured torment" he had wished on Goneril, the victim of his daughters' ingratitude. His thinking, unlike Gloucester's, is, for most of the play, overtly secular, and he blames his daughters when he finds himself and his fool in a hovel along with two disguised companions, a supposed Bedlam beggar, and Kent in the guise of a servant. As his wits start to stray his intellectual syntax falters and his thinking becomes fragmented, intuitive rather than rational, but continues to centre on his perceived ill-treatment by his daughters. Groping for an understanding of this treatment he puts the question with which this chapter is concerned:

Then let them anatomise Regan: see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in Nature that makes these hard-hearts. (III.vi.33)

"Nature" we have earlier encountered as the basis for parents' affection for their children, and, less reliably, for adult children's solicitude for their parents, and in the context this seems to be the basis for Lear's question, but there are three difficult components in it (I am leaving "breeds"

out of the discussion).²⁰⁵ “Cause” is the most straightforward, but not simple. We have encountered nature causing things before. It was the promptings of nature that led some of the characters in *The Old Law* to protect their elderly parents from the rigours of the law, and in a later chapter we shall encounter Elizabeth Clinton, drawing on a long tradition, recognised that breastfeeding was natural, and to avoid doing it was to go against natural urges. Lear's reference to causality here picks up his recent question, “What is the cause of Thunder?”, and anticipates his reconciliation with Cordelia, when he offers to accept poison, for she has cause to hate him. She replies “No cause, no cause”, but in his madness Lear had used cause to mean offence (I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery?), so in the question about Regan, “cause” means more than a simple process of one thing leading to another.²⁰⁶

Cordelia's name brings out the importance of heart, a word that occurs more frequently in *King Lear* than in any other Shakespeare play. It has a number of meanings.²⁰⁷ The predominant reference is to the heart as the seat of the emotions according to the theory of humours which held that the organs produced the secretions that shaped personality and behaviour.²⁰⁸ There's no means of assessing how widely known and understood this psychology was in early modern England, for most references to it work independently of their origin in it, and a “child of spleen”, for example, could probably have been understood without having to work out the supposed biology.

The commonest hard-hearted woman in early modern writing was not a rejecting daughter but a mistress spurning her petrachan lover. A poem by Raleigh describes how “Nature, that washed her hands in milk” was commissioned by Love to create the perfect mistress. The result was beautiful and sensuous, but as convention required, fatal to the lover:

205 “Breed” is a word with a history in the play. Cordelia acknowledges that Lear has begotten and bred her, and for this he is entitled to honour, love and obedience. Although begetting and breeding seem to be virtually synonymous, when Gloucester had earlier accepted that Edmund's “breeding ... hath been at my charge”, he clearly meant the process of conception and parturition, but seems to refer to upbringing as well, for he has “often blushed to acknowledge him” which suggests continuous contact with his son. Cordelia's begot and bred, therefore, probably refers both to biological parenthood and to the nurture of children, and if breeding has this latter meaning with any strength, Lear's contribution to whatever it is that breeds about Regan's heart is more than hinted at. (There may also be a suggestion that she is pregnant, that something is breeding within her, body, though otherwise there's no hint of it in the play.)

206 “Cause” can have an indecent meaning, though probably not here.

207 The definitions are available in Schmidt, 524 – 526.

208 A useful and wide ranging survey is William W. E. Slights, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), though he is not strong on the religious dimension.

At Love's entreaty, such a one
Nature made, but with her beauty
She hath framed a heart of stone,
So as Love, by ill destinie,
Must dye for her whom nature gave him,
Because her darling would not save him.²⁰⁹

Such a pretty trope, doesn't, on the face of it, have much to do with Lear's grotesque suggestion that the physical examination of Regan's heart might be expected to find the reasons for her behaviour, but it is another case of nature as cause, with the extra implication that women are prone to hard heartedness.

Attending the public dissection of human bodies at the theatre of the Barber Surgeons was, according to Nunn, such a popular pastime in early modern England that Inigo Jones was commissioned to design an anatomical theatre to meet demand for places. Nunn argues that these “anatomisings” had a similar dramatic dynamic to bloodshed on stage, like the blinding of Gloucester.²¹⁰ Since most of the bodies being anatomised had belonged to criminals, there is probably an imputation of criminality against Regan, and in Q she has, indeed, been indicted before an imaginary court. The main purpose of dissecting bodies, however, seems not to have been diagnostic, but to teach anatomy to potential surgeons, with a lay audience as a paying sideline, so how much a Jacobean audience would expect to learn anything from dissecting the young woman is uncertain.²¹¹

The heart did not deal only in affections. Gloucester uses it as the location of conscience, when he says of Edgar and his supposed villainy

209 Walter Raleigh, *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes M. C. Latham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 21.

210 Hillary M. Nunn, *Staging Anatomies : Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 2 and 111 - 114; his argument that Jones also designed a theatre, The Cockpit, on similar lines to the anatomical theatre supports his general contention, but can hardly be true, for tiered seating round a performance space goes back millennia.

211 But cf an undated sermon by Donne: “As the body of man, and consequently health, is best understood and best advanced by Dissections, and Anatomies, when the hand and knife of the Surgeon hath passed upon every part of the body and laid it open: so when the hand and sword of God hath pierced our soul, we are brought to a better knowledge of ourselves, than any degree of prosperity would have raised us to”; John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. George Reuben Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), Vol. 9, 256.

My son Edgar. Had he a hand to write this? a heart and brain to breed it in? (I.ii.53)

This moral function of the heart extends to a more ominous form of hardness than a literary convention, for hard heartedness also meant religious obduracy:

Hardnes of heart or carnall securitye, when a man neither acknowledge Gods judgement nor his owne sinnes, dreaming that he is safe from Gods vengeance and such perils, as arise from sin.²¹²

Lear's question, therefore, is on one level a reference to the organic basis of emotion, but it's this religious sense of hardness of heart that may well have been the dominant one in early modern England. In Chapter 2 I suggested that a promising source of information about the “average” playgoer's theological and scriptural knowledge was the liturgy of the Church of England, since the Prayer Book provided rationed access to the Bible for parishioners who couldn't read it for themselves, combined with a structure in the language of worship which taught doctrine by repetition. Congregations were instructed that their God's “property is always to have mercy”, and who “hatest nothing that thou hast made”, and the liturgy includes a little respectful prodding by way of reminding God that forgiveness was “according to thy promises accorded to mankind, through Christ Jesus our lord”.²¹³ Hard heartedness in a spiritual sense was therefore familiar from the Church's services. It was encountered each week in the *Venite* at Morning Prayer:

To day if ye wyl heare his voyce, harden not your hartes:²¹⁴

In The Litany also the congregation prayed to be delivered “from hardnes of harte”, and elsewhere in the liturgy hearts are implicit locations of spiritual communion with God.²¹⁵

Early modern worshippers knew of a merciful God with an endless readiness to forgive anyone who was really sorry for misbehaving. The difficulty for a conscientious sinner was in the

212 William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, or the Description of Theologie, Containing the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to Gods Word ...* (Cambridge: by John Legate, 1598).

213 An elderly Anglican joke has a clergyman opening his intercession with “Oh God, who knowest that we are about to have a small jumble sale ... “.

214 BCP p. 105; this is Psalm XCV.

215 BCP p. 118

adverb: “truly repent” means more than regret at being found out, so prayer was needed not only for help with behaving better but for genuine penitence for backsliding. This was a function of the heart as the basis for sincerity, as when Lear questions Cordelia:

Goes thy heart with this so young, and so untender? (I.i.101)

Sincere contrition was prayed for in the collect for the first day of Lent which asks God to “create and make in us newe and contrite hartes”, though the heart was also the place of religious earnestness. The collect for Whit Sunday, accordingly acknowledges that God has “taught the hartes of thy faithful people”, and in the long haul of the Sundays after Trinity, when nothing much was happening in the calendar to hang a petition on, the collects regularly come back to God's function in helping the hearts of His people to do better.²¹⁶ They ask to be allowed the grace to “avoyde the infectyons of the devyll, and with pure harte and mynde” to follow the only God, and “with fre hartes” do what He would wish them to.²¹⁷ In The Litany, again, the heart as an active agent of faith was to be prayed for:

that it maye please the to geve us an herte to love, and dred the, and diligently to lyve after thy commaundements.²¹⁸

This same sense is found at Morning Prayer when God is asked to “make clene our hartes within us”, and at Evening Prayer He is asked for

that peace, which the worlde cannot geve: that bothe our hertes may be set to obey thy commaundementes ...²¹⁹

Regan's heart was clearly not just an organ.

216 Elizabethan BCP, respectively, pp. 67 and 75.

217 Elizabethan BCP, respectively pp. 82 and 83: the collects are those for the eighteenth and twentieth Sundays after Trinity.

218 BCP, p. 43, though the spelling here is that of the Elizabethan BCP, which also has the Litany in a different location (pp. 159 – 162).

219 BCP, pp. 111 and 114.

HARD AND HARDNESS.

There is, however, a major textual complication. “Hard hearts” is the Folio reading. The earlier Q reads:

Then let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart, is there any cause in nature that makes this hardness ... ?

This recalibrates Lear's question. The Prayer Book connotations, together with the pitiless mistress and the functions of conscience and sincerity are less in evidence, replaced by a different theology. I alluded to this in Chapter 2 when discussing Jacob's prominence in *The Merchant of Venice*, and God's preference for Jacob over his brother. Paul, in his *Epistle to the Romans*, had recognised that there might be an arbitrary quality to God's mercy in this preference, by which “Therefore he hathe mercie on whome he wil, & whome he wil, he hardeneth”.²²⁰ This is a bleaker theology than that of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and “hardness” has none of the erotic possibilities of “heart”.²²¹ The abstract noun gestures rather towards the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, while that a hard heart implies a spiritual function missing from hardness.

The different wording of Q and F is more than just a grammatical shift, for it involves an explanatory drift by which Regan's hard heart is not specific to her, but one example among others of which the hardness needs explaining. “These” makes hardness of heart a general characteristic not confined to a single young woman with whom her senile father was annoyed, and raises the supplementary question of who might be included in “these”. For if the question is about more than the specific case of Regan, and includes a wider lack of human sympathy, then the state of Lear's own heart becomes involved, just as he had earlier castigated Cordelia for having a heart “so young and so untender”. This generalising effect of hardness is reinforced by the trial of the sisters which is omitted from F. Lear's question in Q appears after he has, in his imagination, arraigned Goneril and Regan before judges, actually a Bedlam beggar and the Fool, in a powerful comment on justice which is to become a recurring theme in the play. Leaving out

220 *Romans*, IX: 13ff.

221 Williams's deplorable pertinacity identifies male sexual arousal as one meaning of hardness, though it would be difficult to make that work here: pp. 664f; but cf James T. Henke, *Renaissance Dramatic Bawdy (Exclusive of Shakespeare) : An Annotated Glossary and Critical Essays* (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1974), 173f, Partridge, p. 118

the trial, and changing hardness to hard hearts, means that the “trial” of Gloucester stands alone, without the tacit comment on it from the arraignment of the sisters, and so loses the breadth of reference from the particular case of Regan to a wider question about inhumanity.²²²

All this has the disconcerting implication that God might be involved in the cause which Lear is seeking to explain. If hardness is in God's gift, it means that there is a frightening possibility that He is the cause of Regan's brutality towards her father. There is a gloss on this in the liturgy. Because people were conceived and born in a state of sin, at their baptism God is asked to

graunt to these children, that thing which by nature thei can not have.²²³

The membership of the Church and everlasting life are denied “by nature”, which in this context includes an inherited freight of sin; but in the opening words of the collect for Christmas Day nature means something else:

Almightie God, which hast geven us thy onely begotten sonne, to take oure nature upon hym
...²²⁴

The reference is to *Hebrews*, II: 1, and “nature” here must mean our human characteristics, notably mortality, “incarnate” in the language of the Nicene Creed. It can only with difficulty be made to refer to the nature that denies unchristened people eternal life in the preamble to the rite of baptism. This version of nature as standing in the way of salvation is particularised as the Devil and all his works, worldly pomp and glory, covetous desires, and carnal desires. These having been renounced, the Priest goes on

O merciful God, graunte that the olde Adam in these children maye be so buried, that the newe man may be rayseed up in them.²²⁵

The sinfulness endemic to humanity is washed away by the water, though the Devil, the world

222 Taylor and Warren, *The Division of the Kingdoms*.

223 BCP, p. 141.

224 Elizabethan BCP, p. 62.

225 BCP, p. 144.

and the flesh continue to be identified as obstacles to salvation as the service of baptism progresses, and overcoming them was to be a lifelong task.²²⁶ This does not entirely dispose of the possibility of God's possible failure to help with the task.

READ THINE OWN EVIL.

Lear's question, therefore, opens up lines of thought which in turn feed back into his relationship with his daughters. The human heart brings together the possibility of romantic and of filial affection, together with the moral attributes of conscience and sincerity which shade into the spiritual life. Its hardness might be that of a mistress or of a neglectful daughter, but it might also be a barrier to salvation. All this in turn might be caused by nature, and in the subplot nature is invoked as the basis of evil by Edmund, a personable psychopath of the type that Shakespeare was so good at. He takes the stage to confide in the audience his project to secure his brother's inheritance for himself. His reasoning, if he needs any, is based on nature:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law

My services are bound. (I.ii.1)

This law overrides the social convention of primogeniture, of the claims of the legitimate over the bastard, and the moral bonds of family. It's not to quibble, however, to question whether this nature directly *causes* Edmund's short supply of good heartedness. He tells the audience

I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my
bastardizing, (I.ii.115)

and this is only partly a rejection of planetary influence in his life, for it's an assertion of moral autonomy. The results may not be attractive, but it's to live by a code which Edmund has chosen rather than as the passive vehicle of outside forces, which Gloucester's astrological mutterings imply:

²²⁶ With incomplete success: Stone cheerfully estimated that “in an adult lifespan of 30 years, an Elizabethan inhabitant of Essex ... had more than a one-in-four chance of being accused of fornication, buggery, incest, bestiality or bigamy”: Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 519; Stone's figures came from F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1976), summarised at p. 1.

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, - often the surfeit of our own behavior, - we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on: an admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star. (I.ii.104)

(His father had earlier observed that “the whoreson must be acknowledged”, an objectionable way of referring both to Edmund and his mother.)

So Edmund is not acting at the behest of any authority except his own, and his conclusion

Well, then

Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land (I.ii.15)

is a witty comment on the “necessity” he has been deriding. But it's also a reference to two legal systems, the human one which deprives him by reason of his illegitimacy, and the laws of his goddess nature that entitles him. Natural law is an important element in understanding nature generally, and how it relates to the alternate laws of God and of “man” was of concern in early modern England (and later). Apart from this reference, however, natural law is little in evidence in *King Lear*, so I shall postpone a discussion of until a consideration of Ford's *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* which is the subject of my next chapter.

NATURE.

Many people have observed that nature and its derivatives occur more frequently in *King Lear* than in any other Shakespeare play, though their many usages are unstable in meaning. Thus Edmund's goddess has little obviously in common with the goddess Lear invokes in his curse on Goneril. Lear's version is the source not of law but of fecundity, though she can also make a woman sterile and blight her relationship with any child she does have, and this twofold quality of nature as the source of both good and evil recurs throughout the play. Nature's versatility in

these respects was alarmingly demonstrated by Lovejoy, who called it a “verbal jack-of-all-trades”. He and Boas identified sixty-six meanings of the word, to which Lovejoy on his own went on to add another seventeen.²²⁷ It is, he rather unnecessarily commented, a protean concept:

For “nature” has, of course, been the chief and most pregnant word in the terminology of all the normative provinces of thought in the West; and the multiplicity of its meanings has made it easy, and common, to slip more or less insensibly from one connotation to another, and thus in the end to pass from one ethical or aesthetic standard to its very antithesis, while nominally professing the same principles.²²⁸

In a poetic drama this ease of slipping from one connotation to another is a bonus for the playwright, and Shakespeare exploits it to the full. The basic meaning of nature is simply physical existence, as when Regan rudely reminds her father that

O, sir, you are old.

Nature in you stands on the very verge

Of her confine: (II.iv.138)

This leads into nature as a metonym for everything which, historically, was its original meaning, and a number of studies have traced this philosophical pedigree, in particular nature's evolving epistemological function.²²⁹ More important than nature as everything, however, was the frequent implication that nature was not just how things are but how things should be, the normative element of Lovejoy's complaint. Most occurrences of “natural” in *King Lear* have this association, so by derivation “unnatural” becomes pejorative by drawing on the normative creep from is to ought, and “natural” is a term of approval by which nature is a criterion, a yardstick with which to evaluate behaviour.

227 Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, eds., *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore ; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 447 – 456.

228 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being : A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 69.

229 C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 24 – 74 and R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), passim, trace the philosophical origins of the idea, the latter in more detail, though with less interest in literature; also useful on the intellectual genealogy of nature are John Habgood, *The Concept of Nature* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World : Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) (more about nature as environment than its conceptual meaning); Raymond Williams, *Keywords : A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev. and expanded (London: Fontana, 1983).

“Natural” as a noun, however, means something different from the usual adjectival sense, for in early modern England, a natural was someone of humble intelligence, often with overtones of sexual indiscipline, as in Mercutio's obscenity in *Romeo and Juliet* about one in lubberly pursuit of sexual gratification,

a great natural, that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole.(II.iv.99)

According to Trinculo, Caliban, in *The Tempest*, is a natural, a simpleton (to use the least offensive word I can think of), but also a thwarted rapist. He knows how to curse, but speaks some of the most beautiful poetry in the language, and he's human, able to seek for grace, so to be a natural is not to be without intelligence in any uncomplicated way. It may be this meaning that Lear draws on when he refers to himself as “The natural fool of fortune”, meaning that he is a simpleton entertaining Fortune much as his own fool does for him, though it could also mean that he is made a fool of by fortune in the regular course of events.

In many usages in the play the immediate meaning has a shadow to the overt one. When Gloucester calls Edmund “Loyal and natural boy” on learning from him of Edgar's supposed treachery, there's probably a play on “natural son”, meaning illegitimate, a regular expression in Shakespeare's time, though, to judge from the OED, not a particularly common one.²³⁰ Another regular shadow is nature as how someone is, as when Edmund comments on his brother's character and personality:

A credulous father, and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms,
That he suspects none: on whose foolish honest
My practices ride easy. (I.ii.151)

And at the end of the play he decides to do some good despite his own nature by saving Cordelia and Lear, and then delays doing it.

230 OED: “Natural” 15a.

COMPLEX WORDS AND AMBIGUITY.

“Nature”, evidently, is a prime example of what Empson called “complex words”, words that are “compacted doctrine” (Empson thought of discussing “nature” but to my regret decided against it).²³¹ His method of analysis was expressed almost algebraically (he started out as a mathematician), and would be needlessly complicated for my purpose, but central to it was the idea that listing the various meanings of a word using a dictionary couldn't do justice to multiple meanings. With any particular usage of a word one meaning will usually be dominant, but all the other ways in which it *can* be used may cluster around it to comprise the doctrine condensed into it. It's usually only when reading poetry that the cumulative meanings of a word, its associations, definitions, synonyms, homophones, are deliberately brought to mind, but even a casual reading is likely to see a simple meaning contaminated by unaware recollection of other meanings. Groups of concepts, by this process, become associated by sharing the same label, the word which identifies them.²³²

The linguistic abundance of nature is matched by its conceptual difficulty. What Lear meant by nature when he was asking about the origins of Regan's hard heartedness had behind it the single speech in which he invoked nature as the life-giving abundance of the earth and as the agency of his hatred of his daughter. In the early part of the play, however, it has been taken for granted by Lear and Gloucester that family affection and gratitude are the works of nature. Until his departure into the storm most of Lear's references to it have assumed nature to be the basis of family bonds, so that it was unnatural for these bonds to fail. In the same sense, as well as his reference to “Loyal and natural boy”, Gloucester expects nature to cause his son to avenge his mutilation by Cornwall:

All dark and comfortless. Where's my son Edmund?

Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature,

To quit this horrid act. (III.vii.84)

Edmund, however, had made himself scarce though not before he had betrayed his father and secured the title for himself. The betrayal is done with unctuous concern for his reputation:

231 William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 39, 100.

232 It's not a coincidence that Empson was a gifted poet whose work owed more to Donne than to Eliot.

How, my lord, I may be censured, that nature thus gives way to loyalty, something fears me to think of. (III.v.2)

This callous hypocrisy depends on a general acceptance of nature as the basis for family bonds, so that even Cornwall can grasp that it would not be the done thing for Edmund to be looking on while his father's eyes were being poked out. Edmund is sent away on business before Cornwall turns his attention to the old man, so that although Edmund's invocation of nature draws on an essentially positive view of it as the basis of family morality, the recognition is purely intellectual. Calling in this view of nature to excuse himself from being present at the mutilation of his father doesn't, to use Lear's word, *cause* him to prevent it. His nature is of an altogether different order.

If nature is a basis for family relationships, then, it's not a reliable one, and the play's language implies that when some children turn against their parents nature is no longer at work in this positive sense. "Unnatural" and "disnatured" both signify a departure from a norm, and "disnatured", indeed, is probably a Shakespearean coinage for a severance from what is to be expected as natural. The "thwart" child he is wishing on Goneril (to repeat, his own grandchild) is to be an unusual aberrant in its treatment of its mother.

DANBY.

A very useful discussion of nature in *King Lear* remains that of Danby. He began by observing that

King Lear can be regarded as a play dramatizing the meanings of the single word "Nature".²³³

He goes on to argue that the play's main characters represent different and competing conceptions of nature, because

It is how they stand in regard to Nature that gives each character whatever importance it

²³³ John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber, 1961), 15.

carries in the play.²³⁴

There were two distinct groups of characters, the good and the bad, embodying these two versions of nature. On the one hand was “benignant” nature, the rational and benevolent arrangement of the world, which Danby illustrates by effective quotations from Bacon and Hooker. Crucially, this version of nature was derived from God. In Hooker's words:

... it cannot be but nature hath some director of infinite knowledge to guide her in all her ways. Who [is] the guide of nature, but only the God of nature? ... Those things which nature is said to do, are by divine art performed, using nature as an instrument.²³⁵

Against this divine order was a view of the world that was to become associated with Hobbes, one of anarchic individualism embodied in Edmund with his contempt for “custom” and the civility which went with it.

Danby's durable analysis seems at first sight to answer Lear's question about Regan. Nature which gave rise to family solicitude, prompted mothers to feed their babies, parents to love children and children to love parents had given place to Edmund's goddess and her edicts. Individualism had replaced the ethics of the group, a process started by Lear himself when he repudiated Cordelia, and with her the natural bonds of family life. These initial assaults on the natural base of family relationships escalated into discord in palaces which in turn led on to political mutiny and civic discord (these are Gloucester's description of the times), as individualism took over. But perceptive and scholarly as Danby's work is, his version of nature is too monolithic, and there are dimensions to how nature was thought about in early modern writing that don't fit his paradigm. He did not recognise, or at least acknowledge, that his two conceptions of nature were of different modes of response. Edmund's nature, to repeat, is intellectual, a considered opinion of how things are in the world and a rational decision to behave on the basis of this understanding. He recognises that nature as commonly understood requires him to protect his father, but he has no intention of complying. The other of Danby's natures is not mediated by thought, for in it relationships between people are organic, not based on calculation but on something close to instinct. It seems to be this version of what is natural that

234 Ibid., p. 121.

235 Ibid., p. 24.

will “cause” Regan to be as she is.

NATURE AND ART.

Nature as a compacted doctrine has a lot crammed into it, therefore, and there are more associations present in the play. These derive from two common ways of looking at nature as a concept by considering what it was not. One of these emerges from Edgar's appalled reaction when he encounters Lear in the depths of madness, and from the king's enigmatic response: “nature's above art in that respect”. Nature and art made a familiar antithesis. When Lear is confronted by a naked Poor Tom, he raises this with a rhetorical flourish and a practical demonstration:

Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on 's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings, come unbutton here. (III.iv.91)

The art which hides the thing itself under expensive clothes (all derived from animals) is not necessarily an improvement on nature, though it can be. This comes out in the discussion about the relative merits of art and nature in *The Winter's Tale*, when Perdita gives flowers to the disguised Polixenes and his companion at the sheep-shearing. They get rosemary and rue, which Polixenes comments are “flowers of winter”, but which Perdita says she prefers to “carnations and streaked gillyvors”,

Which some call nature's bastards. Of that kind
Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not
To get slips of them
For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature.

This preference for simple plants over hybrids is questioned by Polixenes, who argues that nature working with art gets a better outcome than nature on its own.

Say there be,
Yet nature is made better by no meaning
But nature makes that mean. So over that art
Which you say adds to nature is an art
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock
 This is an art
Which does mend nature – change it rather; but
The art itself s nature
Then make your garden rich in gillyvors,
And do not call them bastards. (IV.iv.73)

The issue is then transferred from flowers to people. Autolycus ridicules the old shepherd and his son, and observes, aside:

How blessed are we that are not simple men.
Yet nature might have made me as these are,
Therefore I will not disdain. (IV.iv.745)

Autolycus is a more harmless version of Edmund, a criminal mountebank, and as the shepherd's son comes to realise, someone who “will be drunk” and is “no tall fellow of” his “hands”. There is an amiable irony, therefore, in his pleasure that he is not “simple”, when the alternative is clearly superior. And, as it happens, on this occasion, the shepherd is only partly fooled, for he recognises that Autolycus's “garments are rich, but he wears them not handsomely”, so art can't altogether outdo nature by surface sophistication.

Nature, therefore, made the shepherd “simple”, but a moral aristocrat. His son, described as a

clown in the stage directions to *The Winter's Tale*, is a “natural” in the sense of having only modest brainpower (though he can read), but father and son respond to finding the abandoned Perdita with spontaneous humanity. When the shepherd finds the baby he says “I’ll take it up for pity” (III.iii.73), and Perdita is taken “Home, home, the next way”. The source of Shakespeare's play is Greene's *Pandosto*, in which the shepherd did not at first intend to keep the child, and was only persuaded to do so by the money he found with her. This mercenary element is missing in Shakespeare, for his shepherd decides to rescue the child out of pity *before* he finds the gold.²³⁶

Lear taking off his lendings to remove the trappings of art, therefore, might be to revert to the innocence of nature and the spontaneous morality that belonged with it, that of the shepherd and his son. But if Regan's heart was caused by nature, it was because the improvement of art had been lost. The ceremonious young woman of the opening scene had become an atavistic murderess, the thing itself with the “lendings” of the court stripped away, the obverse of the shepherd and of Perdita's wild flowers. There are, in short, two narratives, one of innocence corrupted by the court, the other of the civilised court giving way to primitive barbarism. Unaccommodated man, therefore, could be either a creature of innate morality or one of innate savagery. Both possibilities coexist.

Two traditions clash on this. The Christian view that the Fall destroyed the goodness in God's original creation is at odds with the pagan tradition of successive ages of gold, silver, and lead, though both sequences arrive at an unsatisfactory present. Montaigne sneered at the myth of the golden age in his celebrated essay on cannibals even as he was questioning the superiority of his own society. From what he had heard and learned about cannibals, he wondered if the world of sixteenth century France was as civilised as it liked to think. Certainly people didn't eat one another, but the cannibals lived in a society in which nature had not been reshaped by art, and lived meaningful lives which called into question the achievements of the old world:

Those nations seeme so barbarous unto me, because they have received very little fashion from humane wit, and are yet neere their originall naturalitie. The lawes of nature doe yet command them, which are but little bastardized by ours, and that with such puritie, as I am sometimes grieved the knowledge of it came no sooner to light, at what time there were men,

²³⁶ Robert Greene, *Greene's 'Pandosto' or 'Dorastus and Fawnia': Being the Original of Shakespeare's 'Winter's Tale'*, ed. Percy Goronwy Thomas (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1978), lines 1588ff.

that better than we could have judged of it. ... [For] me seemeth that what in those nations we see by experience, doth not only exceed all the pictures wherewith licentious Poesie hath proudly imbellished the golden age, and all her quaint inventions to faine a happy condition of man, but also the conception and desire of Philosophy.²³⁷

Montaigne was not a representative thinker, but he was influential, and Shakespeare had read him. It's relevant, therefore, that *King Lear* is nominally set in a pre-Christian England, which invites a parallel question about progress to that of Montaigne's. Was Jacobean England a world away from the barbarism of a society in which men were blinded and daughters were unfilial, or was there little to choose between them? The play offers no definitive answer,

NATURE AND NURTURE.

Closely linked to the distinction between nature and art, and similarly indeterminate, is a second antithesis which defines nature by what it is not. Nature and nurture was a familiar pairing with which Shakespeare was familiar, and is anyway a proverbial commonplace.²³⁸ One element of this particular dichotomy is explanatory: is heredity or upbringing more important in shaping the person? Hereditary was transmitted through birth, and although the biochemistry of the process was unavailable to early modern England, there was a good working knowledge of how to breed animals to suit human wishes, and it was generally accepted that parents' attributes will be passed on to their children. Whatever his moral shortcomings Edmund is intellectually sophisticated, the cleverest character in the play, and he toys with the nature-nurture conundrum with considerable wit. He describes his "own nature" as "that I am", and ironically attributes his amoral energy to his parents' enthusiasm when they were conceiving him; for bastards

... in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? (I.ii.11)

237 Florio's Montaigne, p. 94.

238 e.g. *Winter's Tale*, IV.iv.89ff.

We heard at the start of the play that there was “good sport” in the making of Edmund, in a conversation at which he was present though not necessarily within earshot. His logic, therefore, is a jocular contrasting of his parents' lust with “the plague of custom”, in which sexual energy is nature, conventional human social arrangements standing for nurture.

If Edmund's bad ways got off to a good start in an energetic commission of adultery, his subsequent upbringing may not have improved him, for the most common reference to nature and nurture has to do with how children were trained to behave. A scriptural aphorism, one of many, sums up the issue:

Foolishnes is bounde in the heart of a childe: but the rodde of correction shal drive it away from him.²³⁹

To link the proverb to my immediate theme, the Geneva Bible comments on the child's alleged foolishness “He is naturally given unto it”. Everybody knew, or supposed they did, that what people were was to some extent what their parents had made them:

... the parents must frame the minde while it is greene and flexible, for youth is the seede time of vertue. ... What example have children but their parents? Well doth David call children arrowes, for if they be well bred they shoote at their parents enemies, & if they be evill bred they shoote at their parents. Therefore many fathers want a staffe to stay them in their age, because they prepared none before; like old Eli which was corrected himselfe for not correcting his sonnes. Are not children called the fruit of their parents? Therefore as a good tree is knowne by bringing forth good fruite, so parents should shew their goodness in the good education of their children which are their fruite.²⁴⁰

By this line of argument, Gloucester and Lear brought their troubles on themselves by not framing their children's minds when they were “green”.

239 *Proverbs*, XXII: 15.

240 Henry Smith, *A Preparative to Marriage* ... (London: by J. Charlewood for T. Man, 1591), 102 - 104.

The Bastard in *King John* is a model of fraternal loyalty, so Edmund's illegitimacy *per se* cannot be blamed for what he was like. The effects of his conception on his character might have been countered by beating him more regularly, and Regan's spitefulness might have been countered by sending her to her room, but effective parenting is not really an issue in understanding the play. Just as plausibly, and with the example of the shepherd and his son in mind, the shortcomings of both could be the result of corruption by the world in which they grew up rather than what they were born like. The failure of Lear's bond with his daughters, one that he took it for granted was natural, might, his question implies, be because nature is not the benign force in the world as he and Gloucester assumed. This leads to a further set of questions about what nature was and where it came from. Hooker's assertion that nature is divinely inspired means that what was natural was what God wanted for people, but the divine presence in *King Lear* is ambiguous, for there are two bodies of explanation for the tribulations of the two old men. Gloucester's world, I suggested, was run by gods who were clearly not Christian ones, more like the frivolous pantheon of antiquity, bickering among themselves and intervening in human affairs capriciously and often with malice. Lear invokes these gods, but only rhetorically, to underline how serious and important are what he is saying or doing:

Away! by Jupiter,

This shall not be revoked. (I.i.172)

Otherwise Lear's epistemology is secular, his troubles caused by human agency, that of his daughters, in defiance of what he takes to be a natural order that has little obvious relationship with the divine. He makes only one direct reference to a monotheistic god when at the end of the play he proposes to spend out his days in prison with Cordelia:

And take upon's the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies (V.iii.16)

The precise meaning of this is unclear, but it surely cannot in itself be interpreted as meaning the Christian God.

The idea that *King Lear* is in some way a Christian tract has been a durable one, despite

almost all references to the gods in it being to pagan ones. Bradley provided what probably remains the most cogent characterisation of the play as a Christian text when he suggested that it might be seen not as tragedy but as *The Redemption of King Lear*.²⁴¹ For the next fifty years or so most of what was written about the play was of a Christian interpretation often amounting to little more than a footnote to Bradley.²⁴² This hegemonic Christian understanding of the play started to break down in the mid-twentieth century, though interpretations of it as broadly Christian continue to appear.²⁴³ One reading with wide appeal was Kott's interpretation of *King Lear* as a “gigantic pantomime”, an absurdist, nihilistic parable for our time, to be aligned with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.²⁴⁴ Such derisory reductionism is worth attention only as a demonstration that for both plays a search for a simple meaning is a fruitless task. There is little expressed hope at the end of *King Lear*, though some readers find a cause for optimism in an interpretation that the King dies happy wrongly believing his daughter to be alive, or in a more abstract belief that the purgatory he has endured has somehow been vindicated in the peace of death. But the consolation resides not in the text, but to our response to it (the same is true of *Endgame*). That suffering is itself redemptive has little empirical evidence to support it, and to die happy in an incorrect belief is the sort of thing that amused Hume. Neither opinion has much to do with Christianity.

But in any case open references to a Christian God were forbidden from 1606 onwards, so the publication of *King Lear* would be caught by the ban, and Shakespeare made brilliantly creative use of the prohibition to introduce into the play ideas which would be blasphemous if openly canvassed.²⁴⁵ So although there are few obvious references to the Christian God in the play, there are a number of allusions to Christian *doctrine*. Thus, when Lear first encounters Poor Tom, he assumes that his daughters must have caused his plight, and to Kent's gentle demurral that “he hath no daughters, sir”, Lear responds:

Death, traitor! nothing could have subdued nature

241 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear [and] Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 285. Bradley remains eminently worth reading whether or not one is convinced by his theological interpretations.

242 This is an adaptation of a jibe originally made by Whitehead commenting that most philosophy was little more than a series of footnotes to Plato: Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 39.

243 A persuasive recent example is Michael Edwards, ‘King Lear and Christendom.’, *Christianity and Literature*, 50, no. 1 (2000): 15. He sees the play as “an eminently Christian work” which dramatises the possibility of redemption as well as human sinfulness.

244 Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (Norton, 1964).

245 3 Jac. 1, c. 21: An Acte to Restraine Abuses of Playes, passed 27.v.1606, forbidding players to “jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy name of God ...”; text in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), IV, 338ff.

To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment. 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters. (III.iv.68)

Imagery and syntax are complicated, for “nature” must mean a general condition, and in the second sentence I take it that “discarded fathers” is not the subject, and that there is an understood “granted”, giving the meaning that it is the fashion for discarded fathers to be treated so badly. By associating Poor Tom with himself as an abused parent, Lear thus generalises the subduing of nature by unkind daughters, women who have rejected the bonds of kinship of which “kind” is the linguistic expression. “A little more than kith, and less than kind” is, as we have seen, Hamlet's punning on this link.

The pelican is an audacious image. She was supposed to draw blood from her own breast to feed her chicks, a widespread belief expressed by Laertes:

..... like the kind life-rendering pelican,
Repast them with my blood. (*Hamlet*, IV.v.146)

A representation of a pelican in her piety appeared, a few years later than *King Lear*, in 1611, on the title page of the first edition of the Authorised Version (though she had disappeared from the more crowded title page of the second edition in the same year). Lear's iconography, therefore, is unquestionably Christian, and as the pelican was a common symbol for the sacrifice of Christ, the allusion, albeit oblique and elusive, is to the Atonement. Although the pelican is a common Christian symbol, she is not scriptural, and the immediate source of Shakespeare's reference was probably the anonymous *The Chronicle History of King Leir*:

I am as kind as is the Pellican,
That kils itselfe, to save her young ones lives:
And yet as jelous as the princely Eagle,

That kills her young ones, if they do but dazell
Upon the radiant splendor of the Sunne.²⁴⁶

Two familiar pieces of natural lore are juxtaposed as contrasting types of parental birds, the nurturing pelican and the murderously jealous eagle (Lear makes reference to the sacred radiance of the sun which strengthens the case for the influence of this passage).²⁴⁷ But whatever the origin of the pelican image, Shakespeare makes provocative use of it by turning round its meaning so that the pelican daughters are ungrateful parasites, the parent's sacrifice disregarded.²⁴⁸ Then follows a shocking play on words by Poor Tom:

Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill (III.iv.71)

It needs no etymological training to work out what a pillicock is.²⁴⁹ The pelican, emblem of the Atonement, is reduced to an indecency. Is this derision of a central belief of Christianity, or merely a gratuitous profanity by a lunatic? Whatever its significance, Poor Tom's intervention is certainly not entirely inconsequential, for he immediately moves on to what he calls "thy words' justice":

obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. (III.iv.73)

This summarises five of the ten Commandments, and, although the text is contestable at this point, "word" is in all the readings and in the context can only mean the Bible. Poor Tom then goes on to describe the life he has left:

246 R. Warwick Bond, ed., *The History of King Lear, 1605* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), B4r.

247 *Lear* was published in 1605, the year of the probable composition of *King Lear*; though it was written earlier, possibly by Shakespeare himself according to some commentators: Penny McCarthy, letter in LRB, 21st January, 2016.

248 There may be a less elaborate explanation for Lear's pelicans than this literary pedigree. European pelicans are now seldom seen in the British Isles, and it's not likely that their modern range has contracted so far that they were familiar birds in early modern England. According to Thomas Browne, however, one was shot in Horsey Fen in 1663, and he guessed that it came from St James's Park, where the King kept pelicans, from where one had recently gone missing. If these birds were there sixty years earlier they may have been familiar to Londoners: Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Simon Wilkin (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852), IV, 318.

249 Williams, p. 1030; OED 1: a penis; in support of this definition the dictionary cites, among others, John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes* (Edward Blount, 1598), but I was unable to find the word there. Q has Pillicock sate on pelicocks hill. The word can also be an affectionate term for a boy.

A serving-man, proud in heart and mind; that curled my hair; wore gloves in my cap; served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of heaven: one that slept in the contriving of lust, and waked to do it: wine loved I deeply, dice dearly: and in woman out-paramoured the Turk: false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey. (III.iv.77)

Poor Tom was Edgar, who had been one of Lear's hundred knights, and if “madness” means anger, and “prey” is interpreted as greed, this is in effect a catalogue of six of the deadly sins, to go with the Commandments. The formal morality of organised religion is, therefore, being set out by someone pretending to be astray in his wits as evidence of madness.

Gloucester had not recognised his son when they were together in the hovel, but when, newly blinded, he learns that he is being escorted by a beggar and madman, he muses:

I' the last night's storm I such a fellow saw;
Which made me think a man a worm: my son
Came then into my mind. (IV.i.32)

This is a likely echo of *Psalm XXII*:

But I am a worme, & not a man: a shame of men, and the concept of the people.²⁵⁰

This is the psalm that contains prophetic references to the Passion, including some of the words from the Cross and the parting of the garments, another glance at Christian belief in *King Lear*, though hardly an endorsement of it.

Another reference to the Atonement is in a detectable ambiguity in something said by the ubiquitous “gentleman” who appears periodically to comment or provide continuity, and therefore serves as a chorus. When Lear in his madness runs from his rescuers, the gentleman observes (though only in Q):

²⁵⁰ *Psalm XXII*: 6. The worm, according to the Geneva Bible, is “the most miserable of creatures”.

A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
Past speaking of in a king. Thou hast one daughter
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to. (IV.v.195)

The ostensible “twain” are Goneril and Regan, but there was another general curse which required redemption, that brought about by Adam and Eve, so embedded in the gentleman's comment is a hint about nature: that original sin is part of it, and that therefore Regan's hard heart is God's doing. He has in her case ignored the plea not to “harden our hearts within us”.

A final Christian allusion is when the old King enters crowned with flowers. Edgar finds this a “side-piercing sight” (IV.v.84), calling to mind the piercing of the side of another King, mocked and crowned with thorns, and brings back the Christian mystery symbolised by the pelican.²⁵¹

None of these allusions is unequivocal enough to provoke the censor, but together they establish that although *King Lear* is set in pre-Christian England, its metaphysical context includes not only Gloucester's pagan gods appropriate to that England, but also an awareness of the Atonement and of the rules of Christian conduct set out in the Commandments and categorised in the seven deadly sins: doctrine and practice, faith and works. Nature as everything, the possible cause of Regan's rejection of Lear, and by implication the source of family relationships as well as their undoing, is therefore not only secular and material, but has eschatological overtones also.

The effect of these theological references is to bring out how eclectic the intellectual context of *King Lear* is. Poor Tom's references are to a Judeo-Christian body of ethical expectations not, it seems, practised by Edgar before he was dispossessed by his brother's unscrupulous greed. They are codifications of morality, the equivalent of what was taught through catechism, but not in any way innate as the shepherd's morality was in *The Winter's Tale*, nor with Regan's heart.

251 Robert G. Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 183 - 6 offers a sensitive reading: spiritual writing of the time, both protestant and catholic, emphasises the importance of imagining Christ's passion in order to appreciate it. Edgar is imagining his own side pierced by the spear, and Lear's response is that it's only necessary to look at the world to see this suffering all around. He concludes (p. 187) “Seen even from a Christian perspective, the tragedy of Lear ... is incomprehensible but not meaningless”.

They operate cognitively, like Edmund's goddess, to be obeyed or not by individual choice. They do not *cause* anything.

NATURE AS ENVIRONMENT.

We have come to be cautious about referring to human nature, and the modern use of nature tends to refer to the organic setting of life. We speak of “natural history” and there are statutory bodies to protect nature, but this meaning seems to have been relatively or totally unknown in early modern England. Apart from two doubtful medieval uses, the earliest OED example of nature in this modern sense is 1662. “Natural history” occurs earlier, but only in connection with the elder Pliny's book of which this is a translation of the title (the translation first appeared in 1601).²⁵² Although Pliny gave some attention to what we now think of as nature, his book is a general encyclopaedia mostly dealing with topics that have no connection with nature in our sense. To extend “nature” as Lear uses the word to include the overall physical context of his tribulations may well be anachronistic, therefore, because it seems to be the essence rather than the actuality of the natural world that he invokes, albeit some recent commentary has emphasised the importance of nature in the play in this modern sense, and has assumed that nature had this tangible meaning as primary.²⁵³

This said, there is no denying the importance of we now think of as the natural world in *King Lear*. There are numerous references to animals, many of them metaphorical, and mostly drawing on the supposed savagery of animals to illustrate that of human beings. Domesticated animals are little in evidence in this figurative way. Horses appear mainly as a means of transport, and dogs are on the whole spoken of approvingly, apart from a curious reference by Kent to Lear's “dog-hearted daughters”: curious, because dogs are usually taken to be the model of loyalty. Cordelia uses a dog in a powerful comparison to bring out the pitilessness of the storm and of her sisters:

Mine enemy's dog,

Though he had bit me, should have stood that night

Against my fire (VI.vii.33)

²⁵² Pliny the Elder and Philemon Holland, *The Historie of the World : Commonly Called, the Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1601).

²⁵³ For example, Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 159ff.

By contrast, there are few references to plants and most of them are negative. Gathering Samphire is a “dreadful trade”, and when Lear is fantastically garlanded with flower they are a symbol of madness not of beauty,

... the idle weeds that grow

In our sustaining corn. (IV.iii.4)

But the most significant element of the natural environment in the play is the weather. Much of the action is set out of doors, and the storm is the immediate physical agent of Lear's destruction. He goes into the storm in an inhospitable landscape in which “for many miles about/ There's scarce a bush” to protect him from “the bleak winds”, and it's the wind that Lear first defies (“Blow winds, and crack your cheeks”). When Edgar hides under the guise of Poor Tom, he realises he must “outface/ The winds and persecutions of the sky”, and indeed it is the wind that becomes Poor Tom's scourge: “Through the sharp hawthorn blows the cold wind” are almost his first words which he repeats a few lines later.

The wind in *King Lear* is a rich metaphor. Wind in early modern England was a vital source of power, providing the traction for ships and mills. It could be harnessed for human purposes to shift heavy cargoes over long distances, and it could destroy an invading armada, but it couldn't be seen.²⁵⁴ The other main forms of power, water, muscle, and fire, were visible, but the wind's rage was eyeless, and the cocks which are to be drowned in the inundation indicate only its direction. The wind

bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth:(John III: 8)

Wind was potentially beneficial, therefore, but also potentially destructive, and in this dual capacity it is a symbol of nature itself, benign and malign by turn, and only partly controllable. It is the destructiveness of the wind and its accompaniments that are dominant in the play, but the damage it does is not random. Edgar's “persecutions of the sky” suggest a personal quality in an

254 AFFLAVIT DEUS ET DISSIIPANTUR was on the medal celebrating the defeat of the Spanish armada.

inhospitable climate, and for Lear the storm was his daughters' servant to destroy him, for even the indifferent elements can be pressed into his obsessive epistemology:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain.
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O! ho! 'tis foul. (III.ii.13)

This perception of the weather as the agent of his daughter's malice doesn't last long, and before he will take shelter from the storm he wants to “talk with this philosopher” to ask

What is the cause of thunder? (III.iv.138)

The philosopher is a Bedlam beggar, or so Lear and the rest think, one of the naked wretches whose plight he had begun to understand as they must “bide the pelting of this pitiless night”²⁵⁵. Earlier, in his magnificent defiance of the elements, though, Lear thought he knew the cause of thunder: it was

... the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pothor oe'r our heads ...²⁵⁶ (III.ii.47)

By the time he has reached the hovel, he has abandoned these pagan deities, and by turning to a

255 “Pitiless storm” in F.

256 “Dreadful pudder” in F.

naked beggar for an explanation, Lear has taken a further step towards what he is eventually to call “the mystery of things”.

What we now know to be the cause of thunder was not available in early modern England, though a perfectly good explanation was.²⁵⁷ This was that lightning strikes and other natural disasters were God's doing. Walsham's analysis of this belief indicates that it was increasingly held most firmly by a particular tradition of reformed Christianity often called puritan, and she piled high her examples to illustrate the belief that providence was seen as the active involvement of God in daily life, essentially a means whereby He could reward or, more usually, punish individuals and communities by suspending the normal workings.²⁵⁸ Any salutary effects of these manifestations of divine annoyance tended to be short lived, which might suggest a prevalent measure of scepticism about random disasters, and any belief in providence depends on God being interested in what people do, and on the view that He involves Himself in daily life in tangible ways.

Walsham offers only a rough estimate of the extent of these providential beliefs, but her analysis implies varying degrees of conviction in God's involvement in daily life. Some people seem not to have believed that there was any at all. With formidable scholarship Elton showed that the latter part of the sixteenth century saw two views of providence gaining ground. One, associated with an interest in Epicureanism, was a growing scepticism about whether providence even existed, and if it did whether it had anything to do with individual lives. It followed that there was no purpose at work in the universe, and that the supposed operation of providence was actually random chance. The second emerging opinion was that providence was incomprehensible and entirely beyond the reach of the intellect, a view derived logically from Calvin's unknowable and unappealable God. This was *deus abscondicus*, one who had set the world going and took no further part in what happened, which had in any case already been determined.²⁵⁹ Elton's argument is that Lear's interpretation of events and his own part of them move away from a broad if undifferentiated religious confidence in “the power that made me” expressed in the opening scene. (I.i.207). Thunder, Elton notes, was “traditionally the voice of the providential heavens”, but in the play the loss of this sense of a meaning leaves a gap in the explanatory metaphysic, and this is the basis of the king's madness. Causal links are replaced by

257 A recent quick survey of a small group of graduates of mature years revealed that although none of us had a clue about what causes thunder; the possibility that it might be an expression of divine wrath found no takers.

258 Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

259 William R. Elton, *'King Lear' and the Gods* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1966), 9ff.

associative ones in “matter and impertinancy mixed”.

THE MYSTERY OF THINGS.

The narrative of family destruction is straightforward, the process much less so. This brings me back to Regan's heart. The central antagonisms which bring down Lear and Gloucester and most of their children are not usually played out face to face. Cordelia doesn't see her sisters after her departure for France at the end of the first scene, and Lear is never on stage with them again after he goes off into the storm at the end of the second act. Edmund and Edgar separate after a mock fight and don't meet again until their duel in which Edgar is wearing yet another disguise so Edmund doesn't recognise him. All this gives a strangely impersonal quality to the family breakdowns, the more so as there is a lack of communication when family members are actually together. Lear doesn't listen to his daughters and Gloucester has no idea what is happening with his sons even when he is with them, and much of Edmund's communication is with the audience, and virtually everything he says to other characters is mendacious. This impersonality emphasises what I mentioned earlier, the lack of individual motivation in precipitating the tragedy, in which only Edmund has any clear reason for what he is doing. Lear's division of the kingdom may have a purpose, but pretending to base it on a trial of love is never explained. We suddenly hear that his daughters want him dead, but can only infer why, for the reason is not given. The death of Cordelia is not explained, though Edmund has planned it, and an audience would expect a captured queen to be ransomed, not killed. Blinding Gloucester serves no useful purpose, and there is in the play, in a phrase of Auchincloss, “motiveless malignity”.²⁶⁰

Shakespeare, though, must have had a reason for altering his sources and killing Cordelia, but the audience must work it out as best it can. With her death and that of her father the play stops. There is no epilogue nor summary from the most senior character present, only a speech of which the, presumably intentional, vapidness serves to bring out the difficulty of putting into words any understanding of what has gone on:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

²⁶⁰ Louis Auchincloss, *Motiveless Malignity* (London: Gollancz, 1970).

The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Exeunt [F: with a dead march]²⁶¹. (V.iii.296)

To underline this lack of any simple meaning to Cordelia's death, and to the play in general, the dramatist added a final sardonic comment in making it difficult to avoid comic bathos from a stage littered with bodies (the plot didn't *need* those of Goneril and Regan to be produced).²⁶² The corpses of Lear and his daughters, together with that of Edmund, are a last symbol of the destructive potential of families, its progress depicted in the action of the play.

We are never told whether nature was the cause of Regan's hard heart, which is hardly surprising as nature is the complex hybrid of the abstract and the material I have been describing. If it is accepted as the basis of family relationships even by those who consider themselves exempt from it, this basis is obviously not a reliable one. When children turn against their parents, the language indicates that this is a *failure* of nature (or a rejection of it). But this is nature as the benign agent of God's wishes for His world, a nebulous life force in the scheme of things, albeit one often easier to make out in its absence than in its presence. For much of the play, however, Lear and Gloucester expected it to protect them from the malice of their children, but as we saw in *The Old Law*, nature was not necessarily any sort of imperative for people minded to ignore it. Nature as an impulse was at best unreliable and as a template for virtue easily ignored.

If nature is the totality of the world, however, there exists much in it that is destructive of what it contains. The references to carnivores like wolves and lions in *King Lear* are a reminder of this inhospitable side of nature, and even the weather is at one stage perceived by Lear as vindictive. Any contrast between the savagery of nature with the civility of the domestic interior of a “graced palace” is spurious, for nature tamed by art produces skin deep graciousness, and justice, the

261 We are sent on our way with a final enigma: in Q the speaker is Albany, who uses the plural “have borne most”, in F these last lines are given to Edgar, who uses the singular “hath borne”.

262 This was one of the reasons that Tate gave for his 1681 revision of the play, a revision which Dr Johnson preferred to the original, and which was the version performed for the whole of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth: “I must have incumbred the Stage with dead Bodies, which conduct makes many Tragedies conclude with unseasonable Jests”; in Frank Kermode, ed., *Shakespeare: King Lear : A Casebook*, Rev. ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 26.

symbol of a mature society, is just as spurious. Lear in the hovel had identified the poor forked creature as the thing itself, but the alternative is not a civil society, for he points up the arbitrary quality of human justice in his great speech in his madness:

see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand.

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;

Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind

For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;

Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,

And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:

Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.²⁶³ (IV.v.145)

Nor is the metaphysical context of the play obviously coherent. This is not a world in which chance is much of a presence. A theme of impersonal mischief runs through Shakespeare's plays, and though it may sometimes be given a name, like Puck, it is often unidentified, and not always good humoured. Chance or luck is one manifestation of this, and I shall discuss the contribution of these in *Romeo and Juliet*, though in that particular play the lovers were star-crossed so luck had a teleological quality that made it more like fate or destiny; but in *King Lear* chance and coincidence make little contribution to what happens. No messenger gets delayed by random mishaps, nobody mislays a handkerchief, and though Kent in the stocks muses on fortune, her wheel is, allegedly, predictable in a way that chance is not. The Fool's advice to let go of the wheel when it's running away with you retrieves chance from the inevitability of the cyclical fortune, but doesn't restore it to the play. The sense that there is something active in the world that causes trouble, however, is there clearly enough even if not personified or openly conceptualised.

One dimension of this is religion. Gloucester's gods as we have seen are cruel and capricious,

²⁶³ It is a curious feature of commentaries on Shakespeare that Ulysses's speech on order in *Troilus and Cressida* is regularly taken to be Shakespeare speaking for himself as a mature conservative (or reactionary), but I have never come across anyone arguing that this speech of Lear's is what Shakespeare *really* thought.

but like chance and fortune they don't make things happen, and more importantly they don't shape the characters of people in the play. This shadowy and contradictory presence of Christian allusion and theology hints that the world of the play is not one of redeemed humanity, and there seem to be references to the unknowable God of Calvin rather than to the altogether gentler God of forgiveness of *The Book of Common Prayer*. But the Prayer Book teaches that the human heart is not entirely autonomous, because God's help was needed in keeping it in good spiritual order, and could be refused, otherwise there was no point in asking for it. To the extent that Regan's heart was the basis of her treatment of her father, then her failure was as much a spiritual as a moral one.

What Shakespeare does supremely well in *King Lear* is to integrate all these contradictions. We never, therefore, get told whether or not there is a cause in nature for the state of Regan's heart, but this does not mean that Lear's question is left as a rhetorical one, anticipating a known response. The answer, though, is not one which can be paraphrased or reduced to a portable message, for this is a poetic drama which brings together almost inexhaustible dimensions of meaning in the interaction of plot, character and language. Drama is, usually, people talking to one another, "impersonated thoughts" meeting.²⁶⁴ Different ideas are present, therefore, even in the simplest play, and *King Lear* is not a simple play, but has particular elements in it which make nonsense of any attempt at a moral taxonomy. Two characters exemplify this. The Fool embodies the oxymoron of matter and impertinency, his choric function modulated by gratuitous obscenity and periodic gibberish to undermine the soundness of his assessments but not necessarily to invalidate them. Edmund can be seen as evil personified, but the evil is modified by his wit and charm, and it is significant that he is given only one *aside*, and that his most important speeches are made when he is alone on stage. The effect of this is to establish a collusive dynamic with the audience which compromises the morality, as when he reveals that he is promised to both the sisters: this potentially amusing quandary is liable to blunt recognition of the cold bloodedness of his intention, in the same speech, to kill Cordelia and Lear.

Madness is an important feature of *King Lear*, with consequent difficulties of understanding. The ravings of madness tend to be significant in drama, and it's in this tradition that, when Lear eventually goes mad, what he says is more lucid than when he was supposed to be sane. But one of the main characters, Edgar, is only pretending to be mad, and though some of what he says in

²⁶⁴ This useful phrase is from Charles Williams, *The English Poetic Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 43: he appears to be quoting, but doesn't say what.

his pretence makes little sense, much of it is clearly full of meaning. With both characters, and to an extent with the Fool, utterances which are explicitly deranged refract meanings in disconcerting and unpredictable ways, and something of the same process applies to blindness. Blindness is a physical presence on stage with Gloucester's bleeding sockets, mutilated by losing one sense retaining others: "let him smell his way to Dover". Sight is more than a sense, for it also includes comprehension as when Kent says "See better, Lear", and the senses are all brought together when the blind Gloucester meets the mad king and wants to kiss his hand. Lear's response

Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality, (IV.v.129)

leads into a dramatic *tour-de-force* of wordplay heavy with meaning:

Lear: ... you see how this world goes.

Gloucester: I see it feelingly.

Lear: A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears (IV.v.142)

The tragedy skirts farce, for audiences might recall laughing at Bottom's muddling up the senses when playing Pyramus: "I see a voice" (*MSND*, V.i.195).

Madness and blindness pile on complexity to be further enriched by the poetry, which, I argued in Chapter 1, is a special form of communication which can say things that may not be expressible in prose. This truism is illustrated by Lear's words in his last conversation with Cordelia:

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,

The gods themselves throw incense. (V.iii.20)

The heart-stopping beauty of these lines distracts from the problem of working out what they actually mean. A survey of footnotes in half a dozen editions of the play suggests that this difficulty is not caused by one reader's, acknowledged, obtuseness, but is because the lines cannot be translated into prose. To construe them it's necessary to suspend the logic of grammar and

syntax and respond to language intuitively, and to accept that their ultimate meaning is likely to stay out of reach. The allusion to sacrifices and the gods opens theological vistas that can be glimpsed but not entered, and “such” is an unresolvable ambiguity.

“BETWIXT DAMNATION AND IMPASSIONED CLAY”.

In January, 1818, John Keats sat down to read *King Lear*, and before starting wrote a sonnet:

For, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay
Must I burn through, once more assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.
Chief Poet, and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!²⁶⁵

This judgement of high Romanticism stands between the modern reader and the Jacobean texts as warning that the mythic quality of *King Lear*, the sense that it contains an “eternal theme”, are time-bound perceptions. It can be read as a fable of intergenerational discord, of children needing to kill their parents, a tract on the necessity of political absolutism, a parable about the redemptive power of love, and so on: the possibilities are many. My concern in this chapter has been to gain some understanding of the indeterminate concept of nature and to explore how it interacts with morality in shaping family relationships. Reduced to its basics, nature is descriptive, how things are, and normative, how things should be, though if anything is clear in *King Lear* it is that there is often an unworkable tension between these two qualities of nature, because how things are is often not at all how they should be. Within the confines of the play this tension is resolved by stoicism on the part of Gloucester and by going mad by Lear, different tactics for dealing with a morally incoherent world. A major element in this incoherence is metaphysical, and there are regular references to the gods in the play, though who or what these gods are seems to vary from act to act. When Albany hears that Cornwall has been killed while in the process of blinding Gloucester, he observes portentously:

265 John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats* ed. Miriam Farris Allott (London: Longman, 1970), 295f.

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge. (IV.ii.47)

Actually, though, it was a servant who was the justicer, as the messenger had made clear, and the hopeless banality of Albany's piety serves only to emphasise how vague the metaphysical framework of the play really is. Having fatally wounded his brother, Edgar echoes Albany's *sententia*:

The god 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. (V.v.160)

The effect of these two jejune references to divine justice is to emphasis how little it features in the play, which in turn contributes to its philosophical confusion. If my reading is correct, also present in outline in the play is Calvin's God who has created a world that only He understands, alongside malicious pagan deities who find their entertainment in killing people. Most of the damage, though, is done by people without much attempt to justify themselves

Nature is in practice a perfectly serviceable idea in drama, and its complexity in *King Lear* is a special feature of a particular play. It will continue to feature in the ensuing chapters, though mostly as a straightforward way of determining moral priorities.

CHAPTER FIVE.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, SEX AND DEATH.

Cain's murder of Abel got relationships between siblings off to a bad start. It began a catalogue of intragenerational discord, as Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, Jacob defrauded Esau, Tamar was raped by one brother who was then killed by another in retaliation. A few hundred miles to the west similar disharmony was the stuff of Greek drama and mythology, as Oedipus's sons killed one another, Medea chopped up her brother, and, as the narrative continued its westward course, Romulus killed Remus. With all this material to draw on it's hardly surprising that fraught dealings between brothers and sisters would become a common theme of early modern plays, nor that the first English tragedy, *Gorboduc*, should be about warring brothers.²⁶⁶

Discord was not confined to the theatre. John Manningham recorded an episode of a woman attempting to frame her brother for a capital crime:

Mrs. T., because her brother would have crost hir lascivious love towards hir man H., she would have practised to hang him for a theife, had not Mr. S. p[er]swaded the contrary. Soe violent and unnatural a womans malice. Hir owne daughter knowes hir luxurie ...²⁶⁷

This, to be sure, tells us as more about Manningham and his difficulties in getting on with women than about what Mrs T. got up to, and we obviously can't infer from it that relationships between brothers and sisters and siblings in early modern England were usually as poisonous as this one. But nor can we say with any confidence that most such relationships were harmonious, because there is little evidence to go on, and theoretical speculation has led to conflicting assessments. One argument is that primogeniture made for friction by leaving younger brothers dependent on older ones and aggrieved by how they were treated.²⁶⁸ Circumstantial support for this suggestion can be found in the lengthy complaint by one younger brother about the injustices of but the

266 At a rough count, disharmony between siblings is integral to the plots of more than a third of Shakespeare's plays. *Gorboduc* is c. 1562.

267 John Manningham, *Diary of John Manningham, of the Middle Temple, and of Bradbourne, Kent, ... 1602-1603*, ed. John Bruce (New York: AMS, 1968), 122.

268 Joan Thirsk, "Younger sons in the Seventeenth Century", *History*, 54, 1969, 358 – 377.

sound of one axe grinding is not necessarily part of a general clamour.²⁶⁹ The friction caused by primogeniture, however, is the starting point of *As You Like It*, and Orlando's complaint:

I know you are my eldest brother, and in the gentle condition of blood you should so know me.
The courtesy of nations allows you are my better, in that you are the first born ... (I.i.43)

Sisters were often differently placed, for when the eldest son inherited his father's estate, his mother and sisters would normally have had arrangements made to secure their position, with dowries allocated to daughters and financial security through jointure for widows. This led Stone to conclude

that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the brother-sister relationship was often the closest in the family.²⁷⁰

The reason for this, according to Stone, is that primogeniture gave rise to an “embittered sense of envy” between brothers but not between brothers and sisters, and he found “evidence of the frequent development of very close ties indeed”. This conclusion, though, will not do, for two reasons. The first is that while primogeniture might, and no doubt often did, lead to friction between the oldest son and his younger brothers, there was no necessary reason for envy among these younger brothers themselves, and their relationship might actually have been strengthened by their shared predicament. The second problem with Stone's argument is that it is supported by little evidence. He gives examples from four families, all gentry or minor aristocracy with enough money to fall out over, but as most families of the period had no wealth to speak of, primogeniture can hardly have counted for much when there was nothing to inherit.²⁷¹

Stone's shortage of evidence is part of a general lack of information about sibling relationships in the period. The question for this study is whether brothers and sisters were habitually at one another's throats, as they tend to be in drama, and the answer is that we don't know. The occasional anecdote, like Manningham's, has survived, no doubt because it was so extreme, and

269 J. A. (John Ap Robert), *The Younger Brother His Apologie, or a Fathers Free Power Disputed* ... (Oxford: for Edward Forrest, 1634).

270 Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*.

271 One of Stone's examples is actually from the eighteenth century though listed in his paragraph on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

some knowledge can be gleaned from correspondence and journals. Trawling through letters and diaries in search of insights about sibling relationships has been an agreeable task however meagre the yield, but rather than burdening the reader with what this material hasn't told us, I have consigned it to an appendix.²⁷²

INCEST AND NATURE.

One pair of siblings who are not at first at one another's throats are Annabella and Giovanni in Ford's *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*. Their incestuous love ends in tragedy but the play, implicitly and in some places explicitly, picks up on the relationship between family morality and nature that was central to *King Lear*. The absence of empirical evidence about such relationships is not surprising, though occasional pieces of gossip have survived, but the ideas and attitudes informing the play are part of a moral tradition which is a far cry from the rigidity of the Homily on fornication described in Chapter 2. The play was published in 1633, along with another two of Ford's plays, all three dealing with relationships between brothers and sisters.²⁷³ Incest was not a criminal offence, and there existed no explicit guidelines about sexual relationships between siblings, except that they could not marry. When in the play's opening scene Giovanni, the chief male protagonist – he's hardly a conventional hero – attempts to persuade a friar that incest between brother and sister is permissible, there was no formal statement that it wasn't. The strength of his love for his sister Annabella is so overwhelming that it is not to be constrained by social convention, and is indeed strengthened by the blood relationship between them:

Shall a peevish sound,
A customary form, from man to man,
Of brother and of sister, be a bar
'Twixt my perpetual happiness and me?
Say that we had one father, say one womb
(Curse be my joys!) gave both us life and birth;
Are we not therefore each to other bound
So much more by nature? By the links

²⁷² Appendix 1.

²⁷³ David M. Bergeron, "Brother-sister relationships in Ford's 1633 plays", in Donald K. Anderson, *Concord in Discord: The Plays of John Ford, 1586-1986* (New York: AMS Press, 1986).

Of blood and reason? Nay, if you will have't,
Even of religion, to be ever one,
One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one *all*?²⁷⁴ (I.i.24)

One of the functions of nature was, as I have argued, to cause families to be affectionate, a theme here pursued to its logical conclusion, the elemental power making parents love their children being adduced to explain and justify incestuous desire. Giovanni's argument distinguishes between what is rational and what merely custom, Orlando's "courtesy of nations", and uses logic to question the validity of "customary form" and to adapt the laws of nature for his purpose. "Blood and reason" both sanction incest, then, because logically the bond of nature strengthens rather than prohibits the love between brother and sister, and creates a unity of soul, flesh, and emotion. "One flesh" is the scriptural description of marriage, and the unity of souls recalls the Platonic ideal of love as wholeness, so, as well as being an exercise in logic, Giovanni's argument draws on well-established, and, in themselves, thoroughly respectable, ideas about love.²⁷⁵ The argument is strengthened further by the implication that it's possible to discern the laws of nature through the use of reason, and to make out God's purpose encoded in them by the exercise of human intelligence. Reason, authority, and scholarship combine to create a formidable argument.

Giovanni's premiss, though not his conclusion, has the impeccable authority of Aquinas, which Ford is most likely to have known from Montaigne's paraphrase:

I remember to have read in Saint Thomas, in a place where he condemneth marriages of kinsfolkes in forbidden degrees, this one reason amongst others; that the love a man beareth to such a woman may be immoderate; for, if the wedlocke, or husband-like affection be sound and perfect, as it ought to be, and also surcharged with that a man oweth to alliance and kindred; that there is no doubt but that surcease may easily transport a husband beyond the bounds of reason.²⁷⁶

Montaigne is making the point that it's a bad idea for married couples to be too keen on sex, which he thought was best enjoyed in moderation, but he shows that Giovanni's contention is

274 All references are to John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

275 *Matthew*, XIX: 5.

276 Florio's Montaigne, p. 90; the reference is to *Summa*, IIa, IIac, 154, art. 9; I have not read this.

authoritative, though only if it ignores the conclusion that the level of desire caused by augmenting natural affection with heterosexual urging is undesirable. Whatever the pedigree of Giovanni's argument, however, the friar will have none of it and he rejects Giovanni's method of thinking as "school points", though he can do little with the logic itself, which he counters only with an appeal to divine authority and to sanity. Giovanni's "perpetual" happiness lies not in the consummation of his love for his sister, but in Christian salvation, which he is putting in jeopardy by contemplating incest, "perpetual" damnation instead of happiness. Later in the play, however, the friar returns to the subject and engages with the idea that the rational interrogation of nature will lead to right conduct, and contends that any individual understanding of nature needs revelation to discern God's will:

O ignorance in knowledge! Long ago
How often have I warned thee this before!
Indeed, if we were sure there were no Deity,
Nor Heaven nor Hell, then to be led alone
By Nature's light – as were philosophers
Of elder times – might instance some defence.
But 'tis not so: then madman, thou wilt find
That Nature is in Heaven's position blind. (II.v.27)

Only a lunatic could suppose that nature alone was an adequate basis for morality. The laws of God had superseded those of nature, for though they may have been all that pagans once had to go on, that way of thinking was now obsolete.

There's something of the quality of a metaphysical poem in these paradoxical exchanges. Knowledge is ignorance, unnatural incest is natural, natural revulsion against it is unnatural; and so the intellectual high spirits continue: unnatural love is most natural, the one flesh of Christian marriage is the more complete for brother and sister, and religion is made to sanction what religion prohibits. *Tis Pity*, though is not a cerebral morality play, for Anabella, the sister, reciprocates her brother's feelings, the couple become lovers and soon she is pregnant, she marries to cover this up, and their love becomes adulterous as well as incestuous. Eventually their secret gets out, Giovanni kills his sister, cuts out her heart and produces it at a banquet in which

he is murdered in the midst of general bloodshed, a lurid ending which, surprisingly, does not provoke the laughter that might be expected from theatre audiences.²⁷⁷

PENNY DREADFUL OR TRAGEDY?

The play is now regularly performed and its stock is high, partly, it seems, because it's supposed to be especially "relevant" to the times we live in.²⁷⁸ For years, though, it had a hostile reception from critics, as had most of Ford's work.²⁷⁹ For many commentators, *Tis Pity* was a scandalous work condoning incest and murder, though the quarrel seems to have been as much with the social ethos which gave rise to it as with the play itself. Ford was perceived as thriving in the decadence into which drama had declined from the glories of the Shakespearean moment, so for Tomlinson, "Ford ... is the real villain of the piece in Jacobean tragedy. He is untrustworthy".²⁸⁰ In a similar vein, Salinger believed that, after Shakespeare, drama became divided along lines of rank: the riffraff were regaled with rubbish in the unroofed playhouses, while the privileged gravitated to the fashionable, and expensive, private theatres which provided "diversion for a single class – the court aristocracy".²⁸¹ Although Salinger's assessment of Ford's poetic writing is not unfavourable,

Ford's indifference to public value, however, marks a further degree in the social conversion of tragedy. Above all, it marks the dissolution of tragedy as an art, since the poet has no objective standard of judgement remaining to check his liquefying emotions.²⁸²

It gets worse with Sensabaugh, for whom Ford was contaminated by the cult of platonic love fashionable in the court of Charles I, imported from Italy, something which Sensabaugh seems to regard as in itself culpable, and which held that love was the supreme emotion, more important

277 I have seen three productions of the play and the shocking dénouement was in each case received in rapt silence.

278 See, for example, the programme note on the West Yorkshire Playhouse 2011 production; the "relevance", however, is not self-evident and tends not to be explained.

279 Lisa Hopkins, ed., *Tis Pity She's a Whore: A Critical Guide* (London: Continuum, 2010) provides a useful chronicle of the play's critical reception.

280 T. B. Tomlinson, *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 268.

281 Ford's stock in mid-twentieth century is described in Wallace A. Bacon, 'The Literary Reputation of John Ford', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1948): 181–99; the improvement to this reputation is described and accelerated by Kenneth Muir, 'The Case of John Ford', *The Sewanee Review* 84, no. 4 (1976): 614–29.

282 Salinger, L. G., "The decline of tragedy", in Boris Ford, *Pelican Guide to English Literature. Vol.2 The Age of Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 429 - 440.

than social conventions like marriage.²⁸³ But these are strictures on the state of late Jacobean drama and on the jaded appetite that it catered for, and behind them is a substantial question: whether the society in which his drama flourished was itself so decadent that audiences would have recognised their own world in that of Parma.

ISSUES.

If modern audiences are more interested than shocked, therefore, the same may have been true of earlier ones. Part of this interest derives from the unusual structure of *'Tis Pity*. There is no simple narrative line of crime and its punishment, for the play starts with a happy ending as the couple kneel to exchange vows and then go to bed.²⁸⁴ All the ingredients of romantic comedy are accordingly there, with the lovers' difficulties overcome and their love expressed in marriage and consummation:

Come then,
After so many tears as we have wept,
Let's learn to court in smiles, to kiss, and sleep. (I.ii.262)

The erotic playfulness of their language as they leave the marriage bed continues an earlier tender seriousness when they exchanged vows, and the resulting pregnancy fulfils the hopes and expectations of lovers and the purposes of marriage. The dramatic comedy, however, is back to front, and the difficulties overcome by a happy ending quickly set in when Giovanni alliterates:

You must be married, mistress. (II.i.22)

When the only unequivocally comic character is murdered the structure reverts to the normal one of tragedy, and the husband kills his wife and their child in grim honour to her "charge" to

Love me, or kill me, brother. (I.ii.253)

283 G. F. Sensabaugh, *The Tragic Muse of John Ford* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965).

284 In early modern England this was a legal way of getting married, though not, of course, for people within the prohibited degrees.

The distinctive structure of *'Tis Pity* calls into question conventional genres and the moral and emotional worlds they embody, and it is unusual in another respect, for once incest has started the subplot takes over. This puts the values and practices of the society in which the play is set in contrast with the erotic affection of the lovers, and further questions where incest might come in any scale of infamy.²⁸⁵ In the fictional city of Parma one character is blinded and subsequently burned, others are killed in cold blood, adultery is rife, and Annabella's husband drags her around the stage by her hair. Giovanni's elevation of love over the values and practices of such a society, therefore, comes to seem rather less like special pleading, and the friar's contention that incest is a sin in the eyes of the church has somehow to be squared with a church of which the most powerful representative is the cardinal who gives succour to a murderer. Giovanni defies the law by his act of loving incest, the cardinal treats the law with contempt: which is worse?

TWO UNITED HEARTS.

Incestuous love, therefore, is fuelled by “normal” desire which stands in reproachful contrast to the mores of this violent and amoral city in which it is forbidden, and Ford treated this love with a gentle lyricism utterly different from other relationships in the play. When they kneel and exchange vows, for example, Annabella is given these lines:

On my knees,
Brother, even by my mother's dust, I charge you,
Do not betray me to your mirth or hate;
Love me or kill me, brother. (I.ii.253)

The tone continues even after Annabella has been married to cover up her pregnancy and incest has become compounded by adultery:

O, the glory
Of two united hearts like hers and mine!

²⁸⁵ This structure has some resemblances to that of *Arden of Faversham* in which a series of comic mishaps finally comes to an end in catastrophe

Let poring book-men dream of other worlds,
My world, and all of happiness, is here,
And I'd not change it for the best to come:
A life of pleasure is Elysium. (V.iii.11)

The dramatist pulls back from the risk of sentimentality by providing a different evaluation of the lovers' activities from Putana, Annabella's "tutress" or guardian, the equivalent of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, who offers no criticism:

fear nothing, sweetheart, 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. (II.i.46)

Putana, however, is tricked into betraying the lovers, but even as disaster looms Giovanni's poetry offers mitigation:

Kiss me. If ever after-times should hear
Of our fast-knit affections, though perhaps
The laws of conscience and of civil use
May justly blame us, yet when they but know
Our loves, that love will wipe away that rigour
Which would in other incests be abhorred. (V.v.68)

This appeal to the judgement of the future recalls the scene in *Troilus and Cressida* in which the intending lovers swear eternal fidelity and invoke "the world to come" to witness:

When time is old and hath forgot itself,
When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,
And blind oblivion swallowed cities up,

then will any faithlessness by Cressida be remembered.²⁸⁶

Giovanni's appeal to the audience for sympathy is picked up in the commendatory verse prefixed to the published text of *'Tis Pity* in which the poet records his admiration for the beauty of "this Whore", who in the context must mean both the play and Annabella,

such as might restore ...

Her Giovanni, in his love unblamed. ...

Rest thou [Ford], that thy name herein shall endure

To th'end of age; and Annabella be

Gloriously fair, even in her infamy.²⁸⁷

The idea that what is done for love is somehow different, less culpable, than what is done for other reasons was a commonplace of drama (Dryden's version of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* was called *All for Love*). Is Giovanni, therefore, appealing to a literary convention which causes judgement to be suspended? And was Ford doing anything more than titillate by writing about something repugnant to normal people?

COMPETING LAWS.

There are three systems of law operating in the play. These are natural law, human law, and divine law, but in his opening bid for sympathy with his desire for his sister, Giovanni drew on only two, and set natural and human law in contrast. When the friar corrects him and insists that divine law must take precedence, Giovanni resolves the deadlock by rejecting the friar's eschatology:

now I can tell you

The Hell you oft have prompted is nought else

But slavish and fond superstitious fear;

And I could prove it, too - (V.iii.18)

²⁸⁶ *T&C*, III.iii.164.

²⁸⁷ Ellice, Thomas, "To my friend, the author", prefixed to the play.

The proof, though, with its appeal to rationality, is not forthcoming, for the friar has brought news that the incestuous relationship is “discovered”, and logic becomes increasingly irrelevant as the plot unfolds. But in his reference to “the laws of conscience and of civil use”, Giovanni splits open human law into what he calls “customary form” and to a form of morality independent of it. His argument is close to Edmund's distinction between the laws of his goddess nature and the human laws that deprive him by defining him as illegitimate. This implies the question of whether there is an ultimate authority for law. The friar believes that this is God, which given his profession he would be bound to, and that only if there were no God, nor heaven nor hell, would nature be an adequate basis for morality:

But 'tis not so: then madman, thou wilt find
That Nature is in Heaven's position blind. (II.v.27)

The human law on offer in Parma is not that of God, even though it's handed down by a cardinal, and by repudiating divine law Giovanni falls back on an unwritten version of law, a sense that there is an innate right and wrong unarticulated by formal code but nevertheless recognisable. His godless universe, therefore, is not morally chaotic, but has available within it a natural law which can be made out by intelligent observation.

Ford was, by training, a lawyer, though he seems not to have practised, and he moved in a social and intellectual circle of men with connections to the inns of court, so he was therefore well aware of the vexed position of Giovanni's natural law within jurisprudence.²⁸⁸ Natural law has been recognised since the beginnings of philosophy, and is based on the idea that there exists a free-floating morality that precedes the formal codes of human law, and exists independently and possibly in opposition to it. Montaigne's cannibals, for example, knew nothing of Europe and its institutions, and yet “the lawes of nature doe yet command them”.²⁸⁹ The very idea that there is such a thing as natural law opens further questions which risk developing into a metaphysical infinite regress, as Donne illustrates, though without getting us very far, in his discussion about whether suicide is a sin. His use of paradox as a tool of argument makes it unclear whether he

288 Martin Butler, “*Loves Sacrifice*: Ford's metatheatrical drama” in Michael Neill, ed., *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 201 - 232.

289 Florio's Montaigne, p. 94.

was defending suicide or taking refuge in rhetorical neutrality, so his professed bewilderment about natural law needs to be treated with caution:

This terme, the Law of Nature, is so variously and unconstantly deliver'd, as I confesse I read it abundant tymes, before I understood it once, or can conclude it to signify that, which the author should at that time meane;²⁹⁰

This scepticism about the meaning and existence of natural law is shared by other commentators, for example Montaigne, but whatever his doubts, Donne goes on to identify the three sources of law alluded to by Giovanni, based on a paradigm taken from Aquinas:

Of all these three Lawes, of Nature, of Reason, and of God, every precept, which is permanent, and binds allwayes, is so composd and elemented, and complexiond, that to distinguish, and separate them is a Chymick worke: And either it doth onely seeme to be done, or is done by the torture and vexation of schoole limbiques, which are excellent, and violent distinctions.²⁹¹

Donne then shows how these laws may come into conflict, so that child, for example, is enjoined to honour a parent by all three kinds of law, but if he or she kills that parent in a “just” war this is not parricide; and in some jurisdictions a son can get his own banishment rescinded by killing his father who was banished with him. Human law, in other words, may sometimes outrank the laws of God and of nature, or, anyway, Donne enjoys the paradoxes that lead to this conclusion. Further evidence of irony is the case of an unnamed state in which sons must beat to death with clubs fathers who had reached “an unprofitable, and useless age” ; and another in which everyone was “dispatch'd” at seventy.²⁹² Within the context, Donne's point is that there are no inviolable laws, from which it follows that suicide may in certain circumstances be justified (his references, incidentally, are overwhelmingly non-scriptural).

Insofar as incest was regulated in early modern England it was as a version of fornication within the prohibited degrees of kinship, defined by the Church, within which marriage was not

290 John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest W. Sullivan (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 40.

291 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

292 The relevance of this to *The Old Law* was mentioned in connection with the play.

permitted. Giovanni, therefore has to dispose of the Church's rules about consanguinity and a general disapproval of sex outside marriage. Fornication went on, but doing it within these degrees could only be justified, as Giovanni tries to do, by invoking a natural law superior to other legal systems. Clever people could have fun with the concept of natural law and the arbitrariness of other laws, so, probably earlier than *Biathanatos*, John Davies in *Nosce Teipsum*, a work in which he blends cynical paradoxes with something approaching mysticism, points out that natural law can be invoked to justify almost anything:

For nature in mans hart her lawes doth pen,
Prescribing truth to wit, and good to will,
Which do accuse, or else excuse all men,
For every thought, or practise, good, or ill.²⁹³

A convenient epistemology in which nature condemns or exonerates according to choice is, as with Donne, not to be taken at face value, because Davies also took pleasure in paradox, though not always in search of “truth”. For Giovanni, though, the idea that nature can “excuse ... every practise” is a useful one, and if his appeal to natural law can draw on a legitimate theoretical tradition, it is not to be dismissed as entirely self-serving.

Whatever the content and status of Giovanni's protestations, there is no mistaking Ford's treatment of incest as certainly tolerant to the point of sympathy, for although the subject occurs in a handful of other plays from the period, in none of them is incest between brother and sister actually consummated, and Ford goes further than any surviving play in attempting to give imaginative life to a shadowy aspect of human experience. His forgiving approach has a long history in literature, even if the great majority of incest stories involve parents and children. Fictional incest between siblings is not common, but it is to be found, though I don't know of any homosexual incestuous relationships. Of these stories, although Ford seems not to have drawn on any single source for the plot of *'Tis Pity*, one very likely model is the story of Canace and her brother Machaire found in Ovid's *Heroides*. Ovid's version is in the form of a letter from Canace to her brother. She had been so young and inexperienced that it was only when her nurse explained it that she understood why she had no appetite, couldn't sleep, and experienced all the

293 “Nosce Teipsum” ll 1189 – 1192, John Davies, *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 44.

rest of the traditional symptoms of love. Becoming pregnant by her brother, she failed to bring about an abortion, and such was her innocence that even in labour she didn't understand what was happening until her son was born. The nurse tried to smuggle him out of the palace but his crying was heard by Canace's angry father who ordered his grandson to be exposed at the mercy of animals, and his daughter to kill herself. He sends her a sword to do it with, and Canace's letter to her brother is written with her pen in her right hand and the sword in her left.

In Ovid's version of the story the brother survives and is entreated by his sister to gather up her remains and those of their son and inter them together, but it is the brutality of Canace's father, Aeolus, which is the main focus of the poem, though there is no indication that he knows who the baby's father is and consequently that incest has occurred. The story is not directly followed by Ford, but from Ovid he could have got the incest itself, the pregnancy, the collusive nurse, and above all, perhaps, the sympathy in the poet's treatment of the story. Even in Turberville's clumsy verse translation of 1567, and regularly reprinted, Ovid's poem is a moving dramatic monologue which brings out Canace's youth and innocence and the contrast between her grief at the death of her son, punished for what she has done, and her father's harshness in requiring her suicide and the death of her child.²⁹⁴

Canace's story is the basis of sixteenth century Italian play which has been suggested as a possible source of *'Tis Pity*, though the play was not available in English and there's no evidence that Ford knew Italian.²⁹⁵ There were, however, two English versions of the story, at least one of which may well have been known to Ford. The first was John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, printed by Caxton in 1483, and twice in the sixteenth century, the second time in 1554. Some years later than Gower's poem, and owing much to it, the story appears again in *The Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate (c1370 – 1451), though this was not as accessible as Gower's poem and is consequently a less likely basis for Ford's plot. Gower's poem is in the form of a dialogue between a lover and his confessor, and his treatment of Canace takes up Ovid's sympathy. He describes a shared childhood passing into young adulthood and the emergence of sexual desire:

Be daie bothe and ek be nyhte,

Whil thei be yonge, of commun wone

294 Ovid, *The Heroycall Epistles of the Learned Poet Publius Ovidius Naso : In English Verse* (London: London, 1600).

295 John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Benn, 1968), viii.

In chambre thei togedre wone,
 And as thei scholden pleide hem ofte,
 Til thei be grown up alofte
 Into the youthe of lusti age,
 Whan kinde assaileth the corage
 With love and doth him fort bowe,
 That he no reson can allowe,
 But halt the lawes of nature²⁹⁶

The poem's narrator is the confessor who tells how in the burgeoning love between brother and sister they were taught by Cupid and his mother, and not by “lawe positif”, which it is clear from a reference to it in the prologue to the poem means the law of the church, as against the law of nature.²⁹⁷ Gower's Victorian editor glosses this reference to “lawe positif” with unexpected insouciance:

Gower's view is that there is nothing naturally immoral about an incestuous marriage, but that it is made wrong by the “lex positiva” of the church.²⁹⁸

Gower doesn't leave the matter there, however, for he returns to the subject of incest in the last book of his poem, where it is discussed at some length. Incest may be now prohibited by the church, but it was not always so. Cain and Abel married their sisters, having no alternative:

Thus was mankinde to beginne;
 Forthi that time it was no Sinne
 The Soster forto take hire brother,
 Whan that ther was of chois non other:

296 John Gower, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macauley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899), I, 230 - 235.

297 Ibid., Prologue, 247, Vol I, p. 11.

298 Vol. I, p. 493; Peter Nicholson, *An Annotated Index to the Commentary on Gower's Confessio Amantis*, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, v. 62 (Binghamton, N.Y: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1989), 220f summarises twentieth century glosses on the relevant lines; all more or less agree with Macauley. The story is discreetly left out of John Gower, *Tales of the Seven Deadly Sins: Being the Confessio Amantis of John Gower*, The Carisbrooke Library 2 (London: Routledge, 1889).

Incest went on being normal, continues Gower, for several generations, still out of necessity, and since Noah's wife and children were the only survivors of The Flood, and the species had to start again, the young had perforce to marry one another:

Bot as nature hem hath excited,
Thei token thanne litel hiede,
The brother of the Sosterhiede
To wedde wyves, til it cam
Into the time of Habraham.
Whan the thridde Age was begunne,
The nede tho was overrunne,
For ther was poeple ynouh in londe:
Thanne ate ferste it cam to honde,
That Sosterhode of mariage
Was torned into cousinage

This exercise in historical anthropology, then, shows how incest became less acceptable only when there were enough people in the world to make it unnecessary, and eventually in Christian times

. . . it was forbore
Amonges ous that ben baptized;
For of the lawe canonized
The Pope hath bedde to the men,
That non schal wedden of his ken
Ne the seconde ne the thridde.
Bot thogh that holy cherche it bidde,
So to restreigne Mariage²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ All this is in Aquinas, *Summa*, in which is accepted that there was a degree of custom and human law in defining incest. God set aside the divine positive law in the case of Adam and Eve's children. *ST*, 2a2a, 154.9

Gower's logic, it must be allowed, makes complete sense given the history of the world available to him, and in the poem is a tacit recognition that prohibiting incest did not actually stop it, and the confessor-narrator records some of the evils caused by love, including incest, a list that includes Amon, with his sister, Lot with his daughters, Caligula with his sisters.³⁰⁰ The catalogue finishes with the long story of Apollonius of Tyre, in which Apollonius realises that the king of Antioch is committing incest with his daughter and has to flee the king's vengeance at the discovery.³⁰¹ This is the basis of *Pericles*, c1608, in part by Shakespeare, and the origin of the plot is made unmistakable by the appearance of Gower himself as a character in it, as a narrator and commentator on the action.³⁰² *Pericles* was a popular play, and a record survives of a performance at court in 1619, and at The Globe after 1625, so it's likely that Ford knew what Jonson called a "mouldy play".³⁰³

The Apollonius story is of father and daughter incest, but Canace turns up again in Thomas Heywood's *Gynaikon, or Nine Books of various History Concerning Women*, (1624), though this version is little more than a précis of Ovid.³⁰⁴ Heywood, however, tells another story of considerable antiquity which provides a further example of the possibility that love between brother and sister is a matter for human law rather than natural morality. This is the case of Cambyses, a semi-legendary middle eastern ruler of five centuries BC. According to Herodotus, Cambyses wished to marry his sister with whom he was already cohabiting. He consulted his counsellors who lacked the Thomas More spirit and were not minded to risk their lives by giving unwelcome advice, so they told Cambyses in effect that he was the one who made the laws so he could do as he pleased. Cambyses is the subject of a play by Thomas Preston, though in this play it's not his sister but a close relation he wishes to marry.³⁰⁵ It's not likely that Ford was familiar with this play, and if he knew of this particular example of the alleged arbitrariness of

300 Respectively 2 *Samuel*, XIII, *Genesis*, XIX, Caligula's excesses were legendary though not necessarily real: Suetonius, *The Historie of Twelve Caesars, Emperours of Rome: Written in Latine by C. Suetonius Tranquillus, and Newly Translated into English, by Philémon Holland*, ... (London: for Matthew Lownes, 1606), Chapter 24..

301 Elizabeth Archibald, ed., *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations: Including the Text of the Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri, with an English Translation* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1991); Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

302 At the time of writing there is a growing consensus that the play was jointly written by Shakespeare and George Wilkins.

303 *Pericles*, ed. F. David Hoeniger (London: Methuen, 1969) lxvi; Ben Jonson, "Ode to himself", in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 283.

304 Thomas Heywood, *Gynaikēiōn, Or, Nine Bookes of Various History Concerninge Women* ... (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1624).

305 Thomas Preston, *A Critical Edition of Thomas Preston's Cambyses*, ed. Robert Carl Johnson (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975); the play is c. 1558 - 1569.

prohibitions on incest he will have got it from Heywood. (Falstaff refers to Cambyses but makes no mention of the actual story; this has baffled editors.³⁰⁶)

Also in Ovid, and sympathetically handled, is the unrequited love of Byblis for her twin brother.³⁰⁷ Her confused feelings when she starts to recognise the true nature of her emotion are wonderfully described, as self-laceration alternates with hopeless optimism in trying to deal with the morality of what she wants. She tells herself that the gods commit incest without a qualm, so that its prohibition on earth is mere convention which, she contends, in Golding's 1567 translation, must not stand in the way of youthful love:

Let aged folks have skill in law; to age it doth belong
To keep the rigour of the laws and search out right from wrong.
Such youthful years as ours are yet rash folly doth beseem;
We know not what is lawful yet. And therefore we may deem
That all is lawful that we list, ensuing in the same
The doings of the mighty gods.³⁰⁸

Byblis's passion is hopeless, and she doesn't succeed in consummating it, for her brother flees from her importunities, until exhausted by her pursuit of him she collapses and is turned into a spring.

NON-DRAMATIC INCEST.

'Tis Pity, therefore, is in an ancient tradition of sympathetic treatment of lovers who happen to be brother and sister, and which takes incest to be an offence against human law not that of nature, which might even be said to promote it. People in early audiences who were familiar with Ovid and with Gower will therefore have recognised that Ford's tolerance was not altogether perverse, and that Giovanni's argument was not new. It's also possible that these audiences were aware that the informal prohibition of brother-sister sexual relations was not entirely effective, and there have been a number of attempts to establish some topicality in the play by linking it

306 *IHenryIV*, II.iv.369.

307 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 213 - 220.

308 Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 285

with contemporary rumours about actual incidents. Hopkins has looked at these scandals and concluded that any connection with the is tenuous, but stories were, nevertheless, going the rounds, and might be taken as evidence that such incest was not unknown, and, as importantly, that it occasioned mild levity rather than outrage.³⁰⁹ Aubrey, a reliable source of gossip if not of reliable gossip, passes on a *canard* about Philip Sidney and his sister, that

there was so great love between him and his faire sister that I heard old gentlemen say that they lay together, and 'twas thought that the first Philip Earle of Pembroke was begot by him: but inherited not the wit of either the brother or sister.³¹⁰

Duncan-Jones considers that letters between the earl of Essex and his sister can be read as evidence that there was a carnal element in their relationship, though if there really is a sexually flirtatious tone to these letters, it might be evidence that brother-sister incest was capable of being treated lightly, even playfully, at least in court circles.³¹¹ The subject is complicated by the use of “incest” as a generalised insult, much as “atheist” was, referring not to a practice or specific belief, but denoting moral or religious disapproval. It's yet further complicated by problems of definition. Thus early in the seventeenth century a number of sinners doing penance for incest were liable to find themselves, among other embarrassments, being preached at by Arthur Lake, the bishop of Exeter who, for reasons of his own, took a special interest in the matter.³¹² The misguided couples listening to the surviving sermons seem in no case to have been related by blood, however, but to have fallen foul of the rules about who it was lawful to marry according to the rules of the Church of England.³¹³ The list of prohibited spouses in the English church was a considerable reduction of the medieval Catholic one, which at one point extended to the seventh degree, a statistical curiosity which must have abolished marriage altogether if enforced, but was a useful source of revenue paid out for dispensations. This was later reduced to forbidding marriage within four degrees of consanguinity, which equates to third cousins, again creating an impossibly large group to be practicable.³¹⁴ For our purposes, however, what matters is that the

309 Lisa Hopkins, ‘A source for John Ford's 'Tis Pity she's a Whore’, *Notes and Queries*, 41 (1994), 520–21.

310 John Aubrey, *Brief Lives: With, An Apparatus for the Lives of Our English Mathematical Writers*, ed. Kate Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 252; the muckrakers were “old Sir Walter Long of Dracot and old Mr. Tyndale”.

311 Katherine Duncan-Jones, ‘Ford and the Earl of Devonshire’, *The Review of English Studies* 29, no. 116 (1978): 447–52.

312 Arthur Lake, *Sermons, with Some Religious and Diuine Meditations* (London: N. Butter, 1629).

313 Centuries later an unsatisfactory small boy allowed his attention to wander from an edifying sermon and went in search of entertainment in the unpromising pages of *The Book of Common Prayer*, where he was rewarded by the surprising announcement that “A man may not marry his grandmother”.

314 Scanlon, Larry, “The riddle of incest: John Gower and the problem of medieval sexuality”, in Robert F. Yeager, ed.,

restrictions on marriage choice, and hence by derivation the definition of incest, were, as Giovanni argues, “custom”, which forbade his love for his sister only in the same way that for Edmund “plague of custom” subordinated his claims to those of his “legitimate” brother. As evidence for the uncertainty about the meaning of incest, in the *Table* it is prohibited to marry a brother's widow, so on this basis Gertrude's marriage to Claudio is indeed incestuous, as Hamlet asserts, and in *Leviticus* is forbidden, though in *Deuteronomy* men are *required* to marry their childless brothers' widows.³¹⁵ The consequences of this contradiction for the divorce of Henry VIII are familiar, but there are further indications of the instability of the understanding of incest and the bearing of church and civil law on it.³¹⁶

“A STRANGE UNQUIETNESSE”

Evidence about relationships between brothers and sisters, and about how they were supposed to behave, in early modern England may be hard to come by, but we have one narrative, albeit from rather later than my period, of an angry dispute between a brother and sister with undertones of frustrated sexual desire. This is in the letters of Dorothy Osborne to the man she was eventually to marry, William Temple. The literary charm of these letters and the poignancy of the love preserved in them are well known. With too little money to marry, and with the Osborne family in particular opposed to the match, it seemed that the love was hopeless, and the tone of the letters is often heartbreaking:

Deare, shall wee ever bee soe happy, think you; ...³¹⁷

The question is not rhetorical, the despair is real.

The most vehement opposition to the marriage came from Henry Osborne, the writer's older

On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium, Studies in Medieval Culture 46 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 93 - 127.

³¹⁵ *Leviticus*, XVIII: 16; *Deuteronomy*, XXVI: 5 – 6: Gertrude, of course, is not childless.

³¹⁶ For an excellent account of the comings and goings, theoretical as well as literal, of the putative incest of the royal marriage, see Richard A. McCabe, *Incest, Drama and Nature's Law, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). McCabe is also very useful on the history of the understanding of incest before it arrived on the renaissance stage.

³¹⁷ Kenneth Parker, ed., *Dorothy Osborne: Letters to Sir William Temple*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 177. There are numerous other editions. Since these letters are available, it would be absurd not to make use of them, but they should never have been published. Unlike most surviving letters, they were entirely private in nature and intent, and this should have been respected.

brother. A string of potential husbands was presented to Dorothy, and rejected one by one, with entertaining accounts of the unsuccessful suitors sent to Temple. The subsequent quarrels with her brother were clearly painful to them both, though she at least was able to keep her sense of humour:

Well twas a pritty Lecture, and I grew warme with it after a while, and in short wee came soe neer an absolute falling out, that twas time to give over and wee sayed soe much then that wee have hardly spoken a word together since, but tis wonderfull to see what Courtesy's and Legg's passe between us, and as before wee were thought the kindest brother & sister wee are certainly now the most Complemetall Couple in England.³¹⁸

After another quarrel about Temple, brother and sister

parted in great Anger with the Usuall Ceremony of a Leg and a Courtesy, that you would have dyed Laughing to have seen us; ...³¹⁹

When he realised that the marriage was inevitable, Henry went on the rampage: according to Dorothy “hee resolves to revenge himself upon me” by putting around stories “in such Coulers as will amaze all People that know mee, and doe not know him enough to discerne his mallice to mee”. The upshot was that “I am afrayde I shall never look upon him as a brother more”.³²⁰

Commentators have universally blamed Henry for the discord, but it cannot have been easy for ordinary members of the lumpensquirearchy to have to deal with someone like Dorothy Osborne, clearly a difficult person whose malicious wit is best enjoyed at a safe distance. But allowing that both sides contributed to the bad blood, there is a disquieting quality to Henry's attitude:

I many times receive letters from him that were they seen without an addresse to mee, or his Name, noe body would believe they were from a brother, & I cannot but tell him sometimes that sure hee mistakes and sends letters that were meant to his Mistresse, till hee swear's to

318 Ibid., p., 94.

319 Ibid., p., 175.

320 Ibid., p., 191.

mee that hee has none.³²¹

Whether Dorothy Osborne understood what she is hinting at here is unclear, for though she could cope well enough with Henry's anger, his other moods made her uneasy:

When hee raunt's and renounces mee I can despise him, but when hee askes my pardon with tear's pleades to mee the long and constant friendship between us and call's heaven to wittnesse that nothing upon Earth is dear to him in comparison of mee, then, I confesse I feel a strange unquietnesse within mee ...³²²

“Nothing upon Earth is dear to him in comparison of mee” provoked “a strange unquietnesse”: perhaps she was embarrassed by the hyperbole, perhaps she sensed sexual overtones to his affection which are apparent to a modern reader.³²³ These feelings were evidently not reciprocated, but the record of what we should now think of a pathological quality to a brother-sister relationship surviving in the chance existence of a cache of letters might suggest that such feelings were by no means unknown.³²⁴

Whether any physical expression of such feelings was at all usual is a matter for conjecture, though there is tangential evidence that may be relevant. A survey of American undergraduates found that 15% of the females and 10% of the males had had some sort of sexual experience involving a sibling, mostly of genital touching. Half the sample reported the experience as a positive one.³²⁵ This lends some circumstantial support for Stone's claim that various forms of incest were not rare, which would explain the relative leniency with which it was treated by church courts.³²⁶ Wiseman agreed, though as she seems to be unaware that auricular confession was not in use, except clandestinely, in early seventeenth century, her conclusion that incest was

321 Ibid., p., 85.

322 Ibid., p., 169.

323 Dorothy Osborne has not fared well with her commentators: David Cecil, *Two Quiet Lives* (Constable, 1950), admires sentimentally and uncritically, and the novelettish title of Jane Dunn, *Read My Heart : Dorothy Osborne and Sir William Temple : A Love Story in the Age of Revolution* (London: HarperPress, 2008) speaks for itself. Neither adequately follows through the supposed happy ending, for though the couple married, only one of their children survived infancy and he killed himself in early adulthood.

324 I should make it clear that my reading finds no support in anything I know of that has been written about these letters.

325 David Finkelhor, ‘Sex among Siblings: A Survey on Prevalence, Variety, and Effects’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 9, no. 3 (1980): 171–94.

326 Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 108, 510.

known about from the confessional must be treated with caution.³²⁷ On the other hand Emmison's painstaking trawl through the court records of Elizabethan Essex produced an entertainingly high level of sexual irregularity but only a handful of allegations of incest between brothers and sisters.³²⁸ Ingram also found prosecutions for incest to be rare, and concluded that “incest does not seem to have loomed large in the minds of the inhabitants of early modern England”.³²⁹ Quaife detected no horror of incest in his study, and recorded that the few cases were all offences by affine, most commonly stepfathers and daughters and brothers and sisters-in-law.³³⁰ Hair similarly found plenty of delinquency among affinities, none between blood relations.³³¹ The incapacitating problem for all criminology is that it can only work with delinquents who get caught, so a few isolated cases could suggest that the practice was very rare, or that it was only very rarely detected. Stone, incidentally, assumed that incest was necessarily heterosexual, but this was a society in which beds were commonly shared by members of the same sex, so the incidence of sexual experimentation among modern American adolescents might well be taken to suggest that enough members of an early modern audience had some sort of incestuous contact to make the love in the play less shocking.

CONCLUSION.

Regan's hard heart might have been caused by nature, which failed to protect Lear and Goneril as it was supposed to, and in *King Lear* had descriptive and normative modes, a benchmark of what was expected and could be relied upon, at once the motive for behaviour and a means of assessing it. Nature could be deified by Edmund and Lear, or it could be a rough description of everything, a philosophical tool with many uses. Ford, through Giovanni, offers a different understanding of nature as the basis of a law that codified and adjudged what people were supposed to do, much as human laws did though without their arbitrary quality. *The Old Law* similarly contrasted human law with a more objective justice less at the whim of powerful human

327 Susan J. Wiseman, “‘Tis Pity She's a Whore: representing the incestuous body”, in Lucy Gent and Nigel Llewellyn, eds., *Renaissance Bodies : The Human Figure in English Culture, C. 1540-1660* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 180 - 197..

328 F. G. Emmison, ed., *Elizabethan Life. [Vol.2] Morals & the Church Courts : Mainly from Essex Archdiaconal Records* (Chelmsford: Essex Record Office, 1973), 38; Emmison pointed out that some of the cases before the courts were based on malicious and untrue allegations as neighbours settled scores.

329 Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 248.

330 G. R. Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives : Peasants and Illicit Sex in Early Seventeenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 177, 247.

331 P. E. H. Hair, *Before the 'Bawdy Court' : Selections from Church Court and Other Records Relating to the Correction of Moral Offences in England, 1300-1800* (London: Elek, 1972), 243; this is popular social history rather than a methodical study; it was, however, a pioneering work.

beings, and the tension between morality, law, and justice is what gives *'Tis Pity* its dramatic power. The unresolved question is the place of God in the relationship between natural and human law. One view of nature was that it was the encryption of God's will in the physical world, so that studying this world would reveal what He wants from us. The logic of this understanding of nature leads to different conclusions. The *deus abscondicus* implicit in Calvin's thinking has no involvement in human life, but had created the world of nature and withdrawn from it. There are traces of this view in *King Lear*. Alternatively, God used the natural world to intervene in human affairs, and would suspend nature's laws to admonish or reward human actions, with earthquakes and floods as punishments and warnings, or fair weather and helpful winds as rewards. Giovanni is on the point of eliminating God from his natural law, and to elevate it above human legislation when the lovers are overwhelmed by events.

CHAPTER SIX.

THE “SMELL OF THE NURSES MANERS” AND THE CORRUPTION OF JULIET IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*.

INTRODUCING THE NURSE.

Romeo and Juliet opens with a moment of sly cynicism. A prologue in the form of a sonnet tells the audience what is going to happen, and already when the play was written sonnets were associated with insincerity and sexual irregularity.³³² The verse form was an old one, but there had been an upsurge in writing sonnets at the end of the sixteenth century, usually attributed to the influence of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, addressed to another man's wife and offensive about her husband. The form was therefore tainted by intimations of adultery and infidelity, and the idealised mistress to whom many of these poems were directed was obviously unreal, a literary convention, not a person. This was being acknowledged by the end of the sixteenth century. Joseph Hall was scathing about

The love-sicke Poet, whose importune prayerful
Repulsed is with resolute dispayre,
Hopeth to conquer his disdainfull dame,
With public plaints of his conceived flame.
Then poures he forth in patched Sonettings
His love, his lust, and loathsome flatterings:³³³

Starting with a sonnet, therefore, introduced an ironical tone to the intensity of the subject matter, a scoffing introduction to the high Petrarchan love poetry and emotional content of the play.³³⁴ Contemptuous references to the banality of a Petrarchan idealisation of an imagined woman are frequent in Shakespeare's plays: “Tangle her desires/ By wailful sonnets” counsels Proteus, and

332 A. J. Earl, ‘Romeo and Juliet and the Elizabethan Sonnets’, *English* 27, no. 128–129 (20 June 1978): 99–120.

333 Joseph Hall, *The Collected Poems of Joseph Hall, Bishop of Exeter and Norwich*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1949), 18.

334 L. W. Forster, *The Icy Fire : Five Studies in European Petrarchism*. (Cambridge, 1978), 50 – 51 describes the assimilation of Petrarchism into English.

As You Like It is a sustained parody on “a woeful ballad/ Made to his mistress' eyebrows”.³³⁵

These associations contaminate the sonnet form of the first conversation between Juliet and Romeo, its artificiality recognised by Juliet's observation “You kiss by th' book”, and a second sonnet is broken off by the arrival of the nurse, whose subsequent comment about Juliet brings things down to earth:

I tell you, he that can lay hold of her
Shall have the chinks. (I.v.118)

There's nothing edifying to be found here, however one construes “chinks”, and “lay hold of” is indelicate by any standard.³³⁶

Romeo and Juliet is rightly celebrated for the rich complexity of its language. These sonnets are examples of this, as is the smutty language of which there is enough to satisfy the most immature taste, though this, I shall suggest, has a dramatic importance beyond simple amusement. Immediately after the prologue there comes punning on “heads” and “maidenheads”, with wordplay on “stand”, “thrust” and the rest of it, which has the serious effect of associating sex with brutality, and is a prelude to the violence with which the play opens.³³⁷ When the prince has restored order, we learn of Romeo's love melancholy, and then comes the first mention of Juliet in a conversation between her father and a would-be suitor, Paris. It's soon apparent that Juliet has not been consulted about the proposed marriage, and that Capulet has little enthusiasm for it, but will leave the decision to his daughter.

At the very start of this dissertation I noted the possibility that some members of early audiences would have dismissed Juliet as a whore. Evidence for this is to be found in the cautionary preface to the main source of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, Englished by Ar[tur] Br[ooke] and published in 1562, the prologue to which, “To the Reader”, makes it clear that the story is meant to be a warning. It is about

335 *TGV*, III.ii.69; *AYL*, II.vii.148.

336 All references are to *The Oxford Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

337 M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1988), 20 relates the servants' jokes with the Petrarchan moonings of Romeo after the brawl

a couple of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to dishonest desire, neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends, conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossypes and superstitious friars (the naturally fitt instruments of unchastitie), attempting all adventures of perill, for thattaining of their wished lust, using auricular confession (the key [sic] of whoredome, and treason) for furtherance of their purpose, abusing the honorable name of lawfull marriage, the cloke the shame of stolne contractes, finallye, by all meanes of dishonest life, hastying to most unhappie death.³³⁸

Juliet's nurse gives no sign of being a drunk, and no doubt friars had become less of a threat when Shakespeare wrote his play, while Brooke's narrative itself is much less hostile to the lovers than the prologue, but in his preface at least there is no suggestion that love was much at issue or offered any mitigation. "Unhonest desire" was the beginning and end of it. Shakespeare is far more subtle, but his star-crossed lovers and their fate are influenced by human agency to which elements of culpability inevitably attach, and which include the sexual indiscipline of the lovers and the collusion of nurse and friar on which Brooke lays the blame. *Romeo and Juliet* involves much more than simple desire, though desire is nevertheless essential to the plot, and the nature and source of it come out in the fluid distinction between love and lust which runs throughout the start of the play (the couple are married by the end of the second act). The imaginary spectator thinking Juliet was a whore, therefore, may not have been seeing the whole picture, but cannot altogether be disregarded, for though marriage sanctified sex, the precipitancy with which Juliet organises the marriage – Romeo is swept along – is driven by sexual urgency which cannot be dismissed as a physical expression of an essentially pure love.

My argument is that Juliet's precocity might have been understood by early audiences as deriving in part from her relationship with the personality and behaviour her nurse, an ambiguous character with an uncertain status within the household. She has duties in the kitchen, but is entitled to a personal attendant when she goes out (II.iv.101), she is a trusted confidante of Lady Capulet and free to argue with Capulet himself, who she derides as a "cotquean" (IV.iii.6). More than just a servant, she is first sent away and then recalled as the subject of Juliet's marriage is put to the girl, and her lewd garrulity on the matter is barely checked by Juliet's mother. In the action of the play, the nurse is the catalyst of the tragedy, the go between of the lovers, the agent of Romeo's access to his bride, the enabler of the imperative love that drives the play, but in the end

338 Bullough, Vol. 1, 284f.

she urges Juliet to forget Romeo and her marriage, and marry Paris whose prospects (and virility) are superior. At this point she is shut out of events as Juliet excludes her from her counsels with an embittered epithet, “ancient damnation” (III.v.36). So who is she, and what does she mean?

An irreducible function of the family is the nurture of its children. Human infants have a uniquely long period of dependency, at first total, then partial, lasting a decade or more (now often extending into their twenties). For a newborn baby, human milk was until recently essential, for feeding it unpasteurised milk of cows or other animals was almost invariably fatal.³³⁹ The provision of this milk is therefore the first responsibility of parents, and when a mother is unable to supply it, either because she has died or for other reason, the plight of the baby is calamitous unless a substitute mother with available milk is quickly provided. Hence the profession of wetnursing, a distinctly mysterious practice about which little is known.³⁴⁰

There is an obvious preliminary point: feeding human infants is not a simple utilitarian act. It was taken for granted in early modern England that nature made provision for the needs of babies, but feeding them had significance beyond its biological function, for it was an example of what is “natural”, a concept of central importance to this thesis. A translation of Plutarch's *Moralia* argued that parental affection must be implanted by nature, otherwise a mother would recoil from her unappealing newborn baby, which of all creatures is the most wretched at birth,

so furred he is all over and polluted with blood, so full of filth and ordure, when he entereth into the world, resembling a creature fresh killed and slain than newly born; that nobody is willing to touch, to take it up, to handle, dandle, kiss and clip it, but such as by nature are led to love it.³⁴¹

Plutarch goes on to dismiss what he saw as the Stoic understanding of parenthood as enlightened self-interest, meaning that parents cared for their children in expectation of a later return of this care from their children, and extends the work of nature, for as well as providing the impetus to care for this displeasing object, nature's gift extended to anatomy. A woman's breast was formed

339 Valerie A. Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies : A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986).

340 Valerie A. Fildes, *Wet Nursing from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford ; New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988) covers too much ground to be informative about early modern English practices.

341 Edward Henry Blakeney, ed., *Plutarch's 'Moralia'. Twenty Essays. Translated by Philemon Holland* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912), 299.

for the delight of the child as

it yieldeth a nipple in the manner of a faucet, very fit and ready for the little babe's mouth, about which to nuzzel and nudgel with its pretty lips it taketh pleasure, and loveth to be tugging and lugging of it ...³⁴²

So the “filth and ordure” are forgotten and the baby has become a pleasure to watch and to write about, the author playing with words in imitation of the child's pleasure in play.

Plutarch's “pretty” is in a long visual tradition of babies at their mothers' breasts, and apart from death and the sexual act no physiological process has inspired more art (the use of the lavatory, for example, hasn't interested many artists).³⁴³ The infant Jesus with His mother is one of the commonest subjects in Christian art, and though many of these paintings and sculptures show Jesus as an infant majesty, hieratic and austere, there is a different iconography, though with roots in pre-Christian art, the *virgo lactans*, showing Him feeding at the breast, a cheerful baby offering a blessing from His mother's knee.³⁴⁴ Such images were, of course, sadly rare in post-Reformation England because the medieval visual heritage had largely been vandalised, but enough has survived to confirm that an intimate activity can indeed have the aesthetic quality of Plutarch's description.³⁴⁵ The imagery is used by The Lady in *Macbeth* when she talks of the baby “smiling in my face”, for

I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me ... (I.vii.54).

And Cleopatra draws on the same tradition when she jokes about the asp which is the means of her suicide:

342 Ibid, p.298; OED gives this as its only example of “nudgel”, though the sense of this attractive word seems clear enough.

343 Rodin's “Thinker” is a possible exception.

344 Victor Lasareff, ‘Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin’, *The Art Bulletin*, 20 (1938), 26–65.

345 A few examples randomly known to me are probably enough to illustrate this survival and to postulate a living tradition that resurfaced in later British art: wall paintings at Great Canfield, Essex, a notably gentle image, and a rather later one in Belchamp Walter, also in Essex; a stained glass example at Warndon, Worcestershire is very similar to one at nearby Hadbury. The subject continued to be popular in Roman Catholic Europe, which produced Titian's late “Madonna and Child” of c1560, one of the loveliest objects on earth, now in England's national gallery.

Peace, peace.

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep? (V.ii.312.)

The imperative to feed a newborn child, in short, had emotional and aesthetic connotations which went beyond its mundane utility.

For most new parents there can have been nothing problematic about any of this, and the necessary time and trouble were provided without a second thought. In early modern England, however, there was a controversial possibility of providing a wetnurse whose milk could keep a baby alive, such as had been found for Juliet. A way into the material is through an essential text, a short book by Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, published in 1622, which describes the remorse, regret, anger, and a sense of loss, felt by a mother whose children had been wetnursed.³⁴⁶ The book is a unique record of personal experience and the painful lessons gained from it. The author, a widow, is delighted that her daughter-in-law is not going to employ a wetnurse, but intends to feed her babies herself, and is prepared to face down the scorn that she expects to attract. Lady Clinton's argument starts unconvincingly as she tries to prove by examples and precepts from scripture that breastfeeding her babies is a mother's responsibility, but, since the Bible is nearly silent on the subject, this doesn't get her very far. More persuasive is the claim that it is in a woman's "nature" to feed her own children, a nature that is the agency of God's will,

for by his secret operation, the mother's affection is so knit by nature's law to her tender babe, as she findes no power to deny to suckle it, no, not when shee is in hazard to lose her owne life, by attending to it.³⁴⁷

This is very close to Plutarch's ideas, and "nature" becomes a constant element in the argument. Nature is conceived as a compulsion inculcated by God, and includes non-human creation, the animals who feed their young doing so "as if nature did speake in them".³⁴⁸ This

346 Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (At Oxford : Printed by Iohn Lichfield, and James, 1622). She was born c1574, widowed 1619, died c1630 (DNB). This book has not had the attention it deserves. A rather patronising discussion is Valerie Wayne, "Advice for women from mothers and patriarchs", in Helen Wilcox, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56 - 79.

347 Clinton, *Nurserie*, p. 8

348 *Ibid.*, p. 8

natural affection will be missing in “venal” nurses who care for children “for lucre sake”.³⁴⁹ Such women “whom wages hyres” are selling the milk intended for their own children, and mothers who entrust their children do so

to one that will seeme to estrange her selfe from her owne child, to give suck to the nurse-child: This she may faine do upon a covetous composition, but she frets at in her minde, if she have any natural affection.³⁵⁰

Using a nurse, then, causes a poor woman to banish her own child so as to entertain a richer woman's, “bidding her unlove her own to love yours”.³⁵¹

At this stage of her argument, Elizabeth Clinton is not yet ready to confront the obvious parallels between the wetnurse estranging herself from her children and the employer estranging her child by using a wetnurse. She had given birth to eighteen children, and had found their nurses to be mostly unsatisfactory:

I have found by grievous experience, such dissembling in nurses, pretending sufficiency of milke, when indeed they had too much scarcitie; pretending willingness, towardnesse, wakefulnesse, when indeed they have been most wilfull, most froward, and most slothfull, as I feare the death of one or two of my little babes came by the default of their nurses. Of all those which I had for eighteene children, I had but two which were throughly willing, and carefull: divers have had their children miscarry in the nurses hands, and are such mothers (if it were by the nurses carelesnesse) guiltlesse?³⁵²

“The death of one or two of my little babes” gives a glimpse of tragedy which the last sentence makes the more poignant: for her anger is not only against the nurses, but against herself for using them. So why, she invites her readers to ask, had she not done what she in now congratulating her daughter-in-law for doing?

349 Ibid., p. 16.

350 Ibid., p. 18.

351 Ibid., p. 19.

352 Ibid., p. 18.

I knowe & acknowledge that I should have done it, and having not done it, it was not for want of will in my selfe, but *partly I was overruled by anothers authority, and partly deceived by somes ill counsell, & partly I had not so well considered of my duty in this motherly office, as since I did, when it was too late for me to put it in execution.*³⁵³

Since the superior authority can only have been that of her husband, her anger extends to him also. Elizabeth Clinton, moreover, had another source of guilt in the bad example she had set, for she thought that what often lay behind the use of nurses related to social status. The unnatural behaviour is most commonly “the sinne of the Higher, and the richer sort”, though women of lower rank will “imitate their betters” and beggar their husbands in the process.³⁵⁴ It is gratifying, therefore, to the widow that her daughter-in-law is putting this right by her example.

It is, though, distasteful that this remorse found expression in the vilification of the very women providing a service for which “the higher, and the richer sort” have created a demand, and there's no sisterly concern in the book for a women who might have had milk to sell only because a baby had died. But hostility to this group of women, of which Juliet's nurse was a member, is a standard feature of writing on the subject, and there is little that is original in Elizabeth Clinton's argument apart from the pain of her regret and anger.

This writing goes back millennia. Plato had ruled in favour of wetnursing in *The Republic*, but it was allowed in Utopia, though only when the mother was incapacitated or had died.³⁵⁵ The basis for much of later discussion is the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius (c130 – 180 CE), a sort of commonplace book made up of random thoughts and opinions which the compiler had come across during the time he had lived in Greece and Rome.³⁵⁶ His compendium was not translated into English during my period, but it was well known, and was the acknowledged source of a close paraphrase available in English.³⁵⁷ Gellius is the starting point for what amounts almost to a genre, the main source of ideas in the copious and repetitious writing about wetnursing. This was not confined to advice books and other didactic works on the family, and Lyly, for example,

353 Ibid., pp. 15f.; the italics are, interestingly, in the original.

354 Ibid., p. 11

355 Thomas More, *The Complete Works*, Vol.4 *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 142 - 3.

356 Aulus Gellius, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1927), Vol 2, 353ff.

357 Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-Birth, Or, The Happy Deliverie of Women, To Which Is Added, a Treatise of the Diseases of Infants* (London: A. Hatfield, 1612), I. i. 2..

devotes several pages to the subject in *Euphues*, much of his material, though not all of it, a direct crib from Elyot's *The Governour*, which in turn borrows freely from Plutarch.³⁵⁸ An early summary of the received ideas was Thomas Becon's *Catechism* in which he argued that God, who did nothing "in vain", had provided a mother with milk "to nourish and bring up her infant", so mothers who for "niceness or for ease" did not feed their children were "but half mothers". They offended God by resisting His ordinances, because the trouble of nursing "God as a penance hath laid upon them". Such mothers corrupted their children by having them fed "unnatural milk", with the result that children of "gentle and godly" parents "prove churlish and wicked, and utterly estranged from the nature and good disposition of the parents".³⁵⁹

Becon knew Gellius's book, as did Erasmus, who may have been one of Becon's sources. Erasmus had given thirteen reasons why a mother should feed her own child, though this work is in Latin, in a work directed towards priests, and has never, so far as I can tell, been translated into English.³⁶⁰ It was though, supplemented by a more approachable Colloquy which was quickly available in English.³⁶¹ His reasons were grouped into three main arguments in favour of a mother feeding her children herself. Not to do so was to go against God and nature, it was bad for the child's physical and spiritual health, and it was bad for the mother's health. These are all commonplaces in the literature, though Gellius had included an additional risk, that of the child being substituted, either because the nurse wanted to avoid punishment for negligence if the child had died or been injured, or because she wanted her own child to have an advantageous upbringing in a prosperous household. Guillemeau gives a number of dubious historical examples of such switches, but whether or not there was a common fear that the wrong child might be returned by a nurse, the substitution of the nurse's own child for that of her employers does, in fact, crop up in drama of the period. One example is Lyly's *Mother Bombie*, written in about 1594, a play of moderate accomplishment, which concerns the machinations of two fathers of simple children seeking to hide their children's shortcomings so as to marry them to the seemingly more intelligent offspring of their neighbour. Meanwhile an impoverished daughter has fallen in reciprocated love with her supposed brother, and another couple have thwarted their parents in their choice of spouses by marrying for love rather than for parental advantage. Events

358 John Lyly, *Complete Works*, ed. R. Warwick Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), Vol. 1, 264 - 66.

359 Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, Publications of The Parker Society, v. 3 (Cambridge: Printed at the University Press, 1844), 347 - 8.

360 Desiderius Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi*, ed. Jacques. Chomarat (Amsterdam ; London: North-Holland, 1994), V, 875F – 87E.

361 Desiderius Erasmus, "The Young Mother", *Collected Works of Erasmus*. Vol.39-40, *Colloquies*, trans. Craig Ringwalt Thompson (Toronto ; London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 590ff.

in the convoluted plots are managed by four servants with a variety of motives, and a series of marriages is in the offing when a new character appears, the apparent mother of the loving siblings, who enters with

I forbid the banes.

She has got wind of the impending marriage of the two simpletons – who are engagingly innocent, not entirely figures of fun – and comes forward to show why they cannot marry: about eighteen years earlier she had wetnursed a boy and a girl:

I had at that time two children of mine own, and being poore, thought it better to change them than to kill them, I imagined if by device I coulde thrust my children into your houses, they should be wel brought up in their youth, and wisely provided for in their age, nature wrought with me, and when they were weaned I sent mine home in sted of yours, which hethereto you have kept tenderly as yours:³⁶²

The incredulity of the fathers is dealt with by the time-honoured device of secret birthmarks, the children brought up by the nurse are not brother and sister and so are free to marry, and the fathers of the substituted children are delighted to find that they are not after all parents of “fooles” and that their actual children are about to make the desirable match for which the dim changelings were intended.

Vicinia, the former wetnurse who has substituted her own children, was aware of the mutual attraction of the young woman and man she had brought up, and decides to reveal the truth, at great personal risk, because

My verie bowels earned within me, that I shuld be author of such vilde incest, an hindrance to lawfull love. (ll. 1031)

She is looking to escape punishment because she has prevented incest and furthered a desirable

362 John Lyly, *Mother Bombie*, ed. Kathleen M. Lea (London: Malone Society, 1948), ll. 2,000ff; references are to this edition.

match between the children she has brought up, “hoping”, as she says “you will pardon me, as I have pittied them”. The systematic deception over eighteen years is shrugged off in the general relief and pleasure, the only dissenting voices being those of the Vicinia's own children, about to lose those who they believed to be their fathers:

Soft, Ile not swap my father for all this. (l. 1207)

Arrangements are made to care for them, however, and events are brought to a tidy if unconvincing conclusion.

As well as being an example of one of the supposed risks of employing wetnurses, *Mother Bombie* takes us back to Elizabeth Clinton, because of the reliance of much of the plot on the importance of nature as at once a point of reference and a source of motivation. Nature had “wrought with” Vicinia to attempt to benefit her own children over her nurselings, as a better way out of poverty than killing them, and the upshot of her revelation is that the children she has fostered can marry “by consent of parents and nature”. The play concludes with concord now that nature has been respected.

THE NATURE OF MOTHERHOOD.

If it's hard to believe that many children were actually substituted by their nurses, a more realistic fear was probably the risk of negligence by a woman whose only interest in the child may have been a mercenary one.³⁶³ This shades into the emotional and hence the moral aspects of breastfeeding, because such a view implies a bond between mother and child which is based on what Elizabeth Clinton called natural affection and which cannot be replicated. Wetnursing, on this assumption, jeopardised this bond. In Guillemeau's words, writing first of the mother:

For if she nurse him he sucks and draws her owne bloud. Whereupon grows a familiar inwardnes, and the child (when he comes to yeares of discretion) finds himselfe bound to his Mother, for many benefits: both in that she hath born him nine Moneths in her womb, and also because shee hath nursed him, watched him and often made him cleane. In recompence

³⁶³ Changelings are a major subject of folklore which presumably informs Lyly's play and other dramatic treatments of the subject.

whereof, he endeavours to shew her a thousand delights, to make her forget or take in good part, so much care and paines, as shee hath taken with him. Hee playes a number of apish trickes about her, he kisseth her, he strokes her haire, nose, and eares: he flatters her, he counterfeits anger, and other passions, and as he groweth bigger, he finds other sports with her which causeth that they beare one another such an affection, as cannot be expressed; & makes that they can never be parted: and if one offers to take him out of his nurses armes, he will flye in their faces, and if it were possible, he would even pull out their heart: and all this proceeds from that inward affection of the child, to which no love can bee compared.³⁶⁴

The corollary is that a child is liable to prefer its nurse to its mother, a view handsomely put by Jeremy Taylor, rather later than my period, but expressing ideas familiar within it. He proposed that there is an instinct to feed one's children, an instinct of which the “humane and reasonable” quality is apparent because experience shows that foster children are loved more by their nurses than their mothers

as receiving and ministering respectively perpetual prettinesses of love, and fondness, and trouble, and need, and invitations, and all the instruments of endearment; besides a vicinity of dispositions and relative tempers by the communication of blood and spirits from the nurse to the suckling, which makes use the more natural and nature more accustomed.

It follows from this that a child will grow up be more attached to a nurse than a mother, for what Taylor calls “exposed or derelict children” bear an affection towards their mothers based purely on “civility and opinion”, and from this is likely to come a poor relationship later in life. He sums up:

This, then, is amongst those instincts which are natural, heightened first by reason, and then exalted by grace into the obligation of a law; and, being amongst the sanctions of nature, its prevarication is a crime very near those sins, which divines, in detestation of their malignity, call sins against nature, and is never to be excused but in cases of necessity ...³⁶⁵

364 Guillimeau, I. i. 3.

365 Jeremy Taylor, *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor* (London: W. Ball, 1837), Vol. 1, 38 – 42; the sermon in which this comes is “Antiquitates christianae, or, The history of the life and death of the holy Jesus”, published in 1675; Taylor died in 1667, and I have been unable to put a date to when it was preached.

It is noteworthy that Taylor, being a “divine” himself, draws most of his examples from ancient history.

It doesn't take much imagination to accept that Taylor, in one respect at least, is right about the adverse effects of wetnursing on a child's relationship with its parents, and it's not anachronistic to think that for a child to be weaned and then have to leave a nurse to go to live with people it may scarcely have known was often a horrible experience. This is illustrated by a story told by John Locke, also later than my period, but surely relevant to it. He was on the whole opposed to physical punishment, though he advocated its use to deal with “stubbornness” and wrote approvingly of the treatment of a bewildered little girl who had been uprooted from people and objects with which she was familiar and not surprisingly was being a bit uncooperative:

A prudent and kind Mother, of my Acquaintance, was ... forc'd to whip her little Daughter, at her first coming home from Nurse, eight Times successively the same Morning, before she could master her Stubbornness, and obtain a Compliance in a very easy and indifferent Matter.³⁶⁶

Locke's understanding of kindness and prudence is a specialised one, and he offers no suggestions about why an easy and indifferent matter had to be violently enforced.³⁶⁷

PERSONS OF NO GREAT RANK.

Clinton was minded to blame her nurses for being less than perfect, perhaps a case of protesting too much, but a standard item in the genre. Gellius in the second century had observed that the wetnurse would be a slave or of servile origin, probably of a foreign and barbarous nation, most likely dishonest, ugly, unchaste, and a drunk. A millennium and a half later, Bishop Jeremy Taylor was sparing with Christian charity in making the same point. There was the risk, he alleged, that a negligent or mercenary nurse would damage a child, because it was hardly to be expected that a hireling would put up with “the inconveniences, the tediousnesses and

366 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. Yolton and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 139.

367 Another glimpse of the emotional issues is in the diary of James Boswell: “Annie Mill, Effie’s nurse, went away yesterday, after having been about eighteen months with her; the separation was a distress to both. We got a fine comely girl to take care of Effie.... To divert Effie was a study to me” James Boswell, *The Ominous years, 1774-1776*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles Ryskamp (London: Heinemann, 1963), 190.

unhandsomenesses of a nursery” more than she absolutely had to. So if the nurseling arrives home “crooked, consumptive, half starved and unclean” with a disposition to “peevisness, to lust, to drunkenness, to pride, to low and base demeanours, to stubbornness”, this is only to be expected because “nurses are commonly persons of no great rank ... and by consequence liker to return their children with the lower and more servile conditions”.

The reasoning seems to be that the social training which a child will get from these hirelings is going to leave it more fit for a life of servitude than genteel leisure. This view is, rather surprisingly, challenged by Burton who pointed out that if a nurse's bad characteristics could be passed on to the nurseling, so could the mother's:

For why may not the mother be naught, a peevish, drunken flirt, a waspish, choleric slut, a crazed piece, a fool, (as many mothers are), unsound, as soon as the nurse?³⁶⁸

His argument goes on that “there is more choice of nurses than mothers”, so that unless the mother is “most virtuous”, a child will fare better with a nurse who will protect it against its mother's vices. Having briefly departed from his usual conventionality, however, Burton promptly reverts to type and goes on to assert that an unsatisfactory nurse was a guaranteed cause of “melancholy”, and after paraphrasing Gellius, to list his authorities for the idea that this came about through the nurse's milk. It is, it must be said, probably the case that medical problems could be passed on in this way: Alexander Pope's nurse was generally thought to have been the cause of the tubercular spine which restricted and distorted his growth, and which left him with the fragile and twisted body that was a source of much entertainment to the numerous people he made a point of annoying.³⁶⁹ The transmission of character through milk is another matter. The belief was well entrenched, and if breastmilk was, as was thought, white blood, it followed that its quality could be crucial in forming the morals of a baby.³⁷⁰ Given the low esteem in which wetnurses were generally held, the outcome was likely to be undesirable, or in some cases comic.

Some years later than *Romeo and Juliet*, a joke began to circulate about King James. He was the University's guest at Oxford in 1605 when he listened to a series of debates organised by

368 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Vol. I, 328f.

369 Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope : A Life* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1985), 153.

370 Guillemeau, K. k4.

university members, among them whether a nurse's qualities could indeed be passed down through her milk (there's no record of whether the debate actually took place). James, however, was given to claiming that he had imbibed his protestantism with his nurse's milk.³⁷¹ We know the name of this nurse (Mistress Helen Litell), and we also know that she received a daily allowance of six loaves of bread, a pint of wine, and a gallon of beer. Mixing grape and grain took its proverbial toll, and Mistress Litell became an inebriate, and her drinking habits were taken by unsympathetic observers as the reason why James was very late in walking, and had an awkward gait all his life.³⁷² There was, therefore, a measure of public circulation of the idea that a child could acquire its nurse's characteristics, evidence that it was not confined to obscure books, though the fact of the Oxford debate indicates that it was not unchallenged.

The idea has a long history and roots in mythology. Caligula was supposed to have acquired his taste for blood from his nurse who put blood on her nipple to inculcate savagery into him, not exactly the same idea as the belief that it was the blood itself that conveyed the moral qualities, but from the same body of superstition. When in her rage at being abandoned Dido accused Aeneas of having been suckled by Hyracanian tigers, known for their barbarity, she was referring to the belief that the savageness of an animal might pass to the infant.³⁷³ Analogous with this is the belief that witches suckled animals, as in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, and set out in detail in *The Witch of Edmonton*.

It is clear that Shakespeare was aware of this belief, and that he expected his audiences to know about it, for he uses it in *The Winter's Tale* when the jealous Leontes demands his son, suggestively named Mamillius, from Hermione who he is convinced has been unfaithful:

Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him.

Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you

Have too much blood in him. (II.i.56)

The boy, in other words, is less tainted by his allegedly adulterous mother than he would have

371 James, *Apologia pro Iuramento Fidelitatis* ... ed. Paul and Roberto Francesco Romolo Bellarmino (Amstelrodami : 1609), 93.

372 Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth: When, Why, and How It Was Written by Shakespeare* (New York: Octagon, 1971), 388ff.

373 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. C. Day Lewis (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), Book IV. l. 366.

been had she fed him herself.³⁷⁴ The imagery of milk continues, and Hermione feeds her daughter herself until the child

... is from my breast,
The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth,
Haled out to murder; (III.ii.97)

On her father's orders the girl is to be taken to “some remote and desert place”

Where chance may nurse or end it. (II.iii.175)

In the event she is brought ashore on a coast notorious for the beasts of prey which inhabit it, and as Antigonus leaves her he can only hope she will have more luck with wild animals than she has had with people:

Come on, poor babe;
Some powerful spirit instructs the kites and ravens
To be thy nurses. Wolves and bears, they say,
Casting their savageness aside, have done like offices of pity. (II.iii.184)

She is found by the shepherd who says “I'll take it up for pity” (III.iii.73), and Perdita is taken “Home, home, the next way” by him and his son.

HOW COMMON WAS WETNURSING?

Juliet's nurse, therefore, comes with a number of associations, mostly unfavourable, but before exploring these in more detail, a digression may usefully obfuscate the subject by showing how little we really know about the practice of wetnursing. Was the nurse a familiar figure in the lives

³⁷⁴ Cf. Thomas Phayer, *Thomas Phaer and 'The Booke of Chyldren'*, ed. Rick Bowers (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 31 – 33 as the source of this belief.

of early modern playgoers, perhaps with a dubious reputation, or was she more a figure of hearsay? For although it's the ideas about wetnursing that best help to understand Juliet's nurse, it would be useful for my argument to know something about the practice in early modern England. It turns out that there is not much that can be said with certainty. Pollock, in an overview which was mainly concerned to counter Stone's idea that the practice of wetnursing was a sign of widespread parental indifference, drew upon a handful of studies from across the centuries and from the whole of Europe. She offered little by way of evidence for most of her assertions, though her conclusions are probably as sound as the evidence warrants, but the fact that the practice of wetnursing continued on a large scale in France into the 1920s suggests that her approach of providing a pan-European survey may tell us little about practices in individual countries, or about particular communities in those countries, because wetnursing seems to have died out much earlier in Britain.³⁷⁵ Fildes's work, referred to earlier, is clinically orientated, and she says hardly anything about how common the practice was. Occasional mentions in letters and diaries written by literate people with time on their hands offer some insights into the practice, but can be of no use in deciding whether Elizabeth Clinton was unusual.

It would be particularly useful to know how extensive was the practice of prosperous families employing nurses as the Capulets and the Clintons did, because this would help in deciding how realistic Juliet's nurse was. There are, however, insuperable methodological problems in drawing precise conclusions from such evidence as we have. The impasse comes about because there are four, mutually exclusive possibilities. Two of these concern the reason why the child was being nursed. It may have been because the parents, for whatever reason, chose to nourish their child in this way, or it may have been because there was no choice. There will have been many cases when a mother could not feed her child, either because she had died or because she had insufficient milk, and children who were abandoned or orphaned will often have had to be put to nurse at the expense of the parishes in which they were found. This was a different case from voluntary nursing. The problem is compounded by the second set of possibilities, whether the child was fed in its parents' home or that of the nurse.

These problems can be exemplified in a survey of the population of Ealing in c1599 which identified nine or ten nurselings out of a total population of 426, eight of them living in a household with a toddler present, presumably the one whose birth provided the milk in the first

³⁷⁵ Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

place.³⁷⁶ One woman was feeding two children, one aged one year, the other three months. One of the Ealing children came from London, and although we don't know where the others were from, all the children being nursed in this Tudor parish were living in the homes of their nurses, so there is, therefore, nothing to be learned from this survey about children who were nursed in their parents' homes. In another rural community about which we have information, wetnurses were former servants of the family whose children they were feeding, sharing their milk between their own children and those of their employers.³⁷⁷ Painstaking work by Fildes showed that thirty-six Hertfordshire parishes buried 1,148 nurse children between 1544 and 1800, but this in itself tells us nothing except that more than a thousand children in that period had their lives cut short, their years undone.³⁷⁸ It is not altogether heartless to observe, however, that fewer than five deaths a year provide no basis for any sort of conclusion about the incidence of wetnursing.

Juliet was nursed at one of her parents' homes, and her nurse was still in the household fourteen years later, but nothing we know about early modern wetnursing gives any indication whether this arrangement was usual in prosperous families.³⁷⁹ The motives for choosing to have one's children wetnursed are just as uncertain. Elizabeth Clinton made clear that it was her husband who made the decision, but that she had also had advice from elsewhere. What this was is unknown, but Simonds D'Ewes (1602 – 1650) recorded in his autobiography that his wife also was given advice at the time of the birth of their first son, who she had intended to feed herself, but was told that “the child should not suck any other till her breasts were fully drawn and made fit for it, during which time it was so weakened, as it afterwards proved the course of its ruin”.³⁸⁰ The boy lived for twenty months, but his death was nevertheless still blamed on the ignorance or neglect of those attending the birth, and on the fact that “when he was born, that by pitching upon a proud, fretting, ill-conditioned woman for a nurse” he was permanently weakened.³⁸¹ In this case, as with the Clintons, the decision to use a nurse was well-intentioned, however questionable the advice it was based on, and suggests that there may have existed some folk belief on the subject, part of an arcane lore of childbed.

376 Allison, K. J., “An Elizabethan Village 'Census'”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XXXVI, 1963, 91 – 103; nine of the children are identified as “a nurse child”, the tenth is added from inference.

377 Linda Campbell, ‘Wet-Nurses in Early Modern England: Some Evidence from the Townshend Archive’, *Medical History* 33, no. 3 (July 1989): 360–370.

378 Valerie Fildes, ‘The English Wet-Nurse and Her Role in Infant Care 1538–1800’, *Medical History*, 32 (1988): 142–73.

379 Pope's nurse remained with the family for nearly forty years, and he was greatly saddened by her death: Mack, p. 406.

380 Simonds D'Ewes, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes, Bart, during the Reigns of James I and Charles I*, ed. J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps (Richard Bentley, 1845), Vol. 1, 45.

381 *Ibid.*, Vol.2, p.143.

The Capulets, like the Clintons, could afford a wetnurse, but most of the population could not. Nurses were not cheap. A letter of 1628 in the correspondence of the Barrington family gives an indication of cost:

Toby I pray give my nurse 44s for a quarter's wages due at Christmas and give her maid 2s, and I will repay you when I see you.³⁸²

A letter of 1629 in the correspondence of Jane Cornwallis Bacon confirms that this was the going rate. She had picked up the bill for a child left in her care, and paid his nurse three shillings and six pence a week, so in two years she had earned nearly £18 (considerably more than the £14 left by his parents to support him).³⁸³ Nine pounds a year was well out of reach of most people, so a widower whose wife had died giving birth would often have needed charity to preserve his child, and by the mid-seventeenth century the remuneration had crept up to £10 a year, supplemented in kind by fuel and food.³⁸⁴

This is perhaps the best place to insert a piece of information that intuitively seems pertinent, though exactly how is unclear. Shakespeare's wife is recorded on her memorial in Stratford church as having fed her own children. The words on the memorial are in the first person and address the late mother, starting (in Latin), "Breasts, O mother, milk and life you give" ...³⁸⁵ Two of her (known) children outlived her, though there's no indication which is addressing her memory here, and the memorial as a whole, and this detail in particular, are perplexing. On this minor puzzle Greer is no help as she was apparently unaware of the epitaph when speculating whether the family could afford to employ a wetnurse.³⁸⁶

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382 *Barrington Family Letters, 1628-1632*, ed. Arthur Searle, Camden Fourth Series, v. 28 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, University College London, 1983), 46.

383 Jane Bacon, *The Private Correspondence of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon, 1613-1644* (Madison [N.J.] : Associated University Presses, 2003), 187.

384 Anne Laurence, *Women in England : 1500-1760 : A Social History* (London: Phoenix Giants, 1996), 81.

385 *Vbera, tu mater, tu lac, vitamque dedisti ...*

386 Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 158f. It would be dishonest to imply that I have read this book from cover to cover. It is 406 pages long, and inspires astonishment at so large an edifice built of bricks made with so little straw.

We may not, therefore, know much about how common wetnurses were, or why they were employed, but it is their reputation that matters for my reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. This reputation was as we have seen, a poor one, and it is the fact that wetnurses were held in low esteem by people who wrote about them that is relevant to the play. People in an audience who were aware of this would realise that employing a wetnurse for Juliet was a dangerous business because of the potential harm nurses could do their charges. There is little suggestion in the play of any physical risk to the child, for the fall taken by the toddler Juliet was a minor mishap, its importance metaphorical. The moral danger, however, is another matter, and the nurse herself raises the question of its transmission through her milk. When the idea of marriage is first broached, Capulet's wife asks her daughter "how stands your disposition to be married?" Juliet's reply, that marriage is an honour she doesn't dream of, provokes the nurse's response:

An honour! Were not I thine only nurse,

I would say thou hadst sucked wisdom from thy teat?³⁸⁷ (I.iii.67).

"Honour" and its derivatives are complex words. Despite St Paul's grudging aphorism that it's "better to marry than to burn", marriage is "an honourable state", as everybody knew from the Prayer Book.³⁸⁸ In the marriage service "honourable" has a protectiveness about it, a sense that marriage needs defending after the long privilege of celibacy in Roman Catholic tradition, and a few people in the original audiences of *Romeo and Juliet* might remember when clergy were forbidden to marry in Mary's reign. So when Juliet asks Romeo if

thy bent of love be honourable

Thy purpose marriage (II.ii.143)

the juxtaposition would be instantly recognisable from the Prayer Book.

The nurse, though, means something ruder when she exclaims "An honour".³⁸⁹ The word had

387 I take "thy teat" to mean the teat you were using; it is obviously the Nurse's. Q2 has "houre" for "honour".

388 *ICor.*, VII: 9. "With the fyre of concupiscence" is The Geneva Bible's helpful gloss.

389 The nurse's language has been much admired: see, for example, Joan Rees, 'Juliet's Nurse: Some Branches of a Family Tree', *The Review of English Studies* 34, no. 133 (1983): 43–47, and Stanley Wells, "The use of inconsequentiality in the nurse's speech", in Philip Edwards, Inga Stina Ewbank, and G. K. Hunter, eds., *Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51 - 66.

impolite possibilities. In Marston's *The Malcontent* a bawd talks of “a falling back, and then honour”, and when Falstaff is, ostensibly, commenting on honour as military glory, his wordplay turns the meaning to his more usual preoccupations:

... honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on?³⁹⁰ (*IHIV*, V.i.129)

A woman's honour might initially refer to her chastity, but the word could then become a term for the physical location of this chastity, a genital association which leads to Marston's joke about “on her”(a joke still going the rounds).³⁹¹

That a word can have an indecent meaning doesn't mean that it always does, but the nurse's reference to the transmission of her personal qualities through her milk invites the question of what exactly this wisdom might consist of, and it's here that the persistent bawdiness of so much of the play's language becomes important. The nurse's unexpected opening words had been

Now by my maidenhead at twelve year old. (I.iii.2)

It was not common, as some editors have claimed, for women in early modern England to refer to their virginity in this way as an expletive: this is the earliest recorded example.³⁹² Here we have another Shakespearean adjustment, for in Brooke's poem, the main source of the play, the nurse was sixteen when she “did choose my loving feere”, so the reference to “twelve year” indicates much earlier sexual experience, and will shortly bring into focus the importance of Juliet's age.³⁹³ It is immediately followed by the nurse's calling to Juliet

What, lamb! What ladybird! (I.iii.4)

390 John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. G. K. Hunter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), IV.ii.12.

391 Many editors acknowledge the likely double entendre, which seems to have been spotted by Dr Johnson, who emended “honour” to “houre” “which is more seemly from a girl to her mother” (quoted Oxford ed. Levenson, p. 175). For more detail, consult Williams. A particularly coarse synecdoche is uttered by Portia, *MV*, V.i.232.

392 A search in EEBO for “by my maidenhead” between 1570 and 1640 produced eleven “hits” in thirteen records, including this earliest one from *Romeo and Juliet*. “By my virginity” from the same period found sixteen “hits” in nine records, including six in a single play by Dekker. None makes any mention of age. Dent's implication that it was a common expletive is therefore questionable: R. W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), M45.I

393 Brooke, in Bullough, line 697.

These are both terms which are susceptible to improper interpretation, something that the nurse acknowledges with a hasty “God forbid”, which serves to highlight the possibility of misunderstanding. Having hinted at a sexualised quality to Juliet, the scene in which she is to be told that a husband has been found for her is quickly turned into the nurse's comic monologue made up of relentless innuendo.³⁹⁴ The suggestion that the nurse's sexual experience began young, at twelve, soon evolves into the twice-told joke about the infant Juliet falling:

And then my husband – God be with his soul,
A was a merry man – took up the child,
“Yea”, quoth he, “dost thou fall on thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
Wilt thou not, Jule? And by my holidam,
The pretty wretch left crying and said “Ay”. (I.iii.41)

“Wit” glances back to the nurse's “wisdom”, while “Jule” suggests a measure of maturity with the diminutive “-et” removed. The language of the anecdote also anticipates the next scene and Mercutio's description of Queen Mab:

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage. (I.iv.92)

Here the “honour” pun about “on her” is picked up by “bear” and “carriage”.

The anecdote about Juliet's fall is not in Brooke, where there is a very different story about the girl, and a different notion of childhood:

³⁹⁴ According to Williams, the following words from the scene almost certainly carry improper meanings: honour, lamb, ladybird, fall, cockerel, stone, knock, wax; the following are also suspect: fool, bump, grace, big. Williams spent much of his working life at what was then St David's College, Lampeter, an institution with close links to the Anglican Church of Wales.

And how she gave her sucke in youth she leaveth not to tell.
A pretty babe (quod she) it was when it was yong:
Lord how it could pretely have prated with it tong.
A thousand times and more I laid her on my lappe,
And clapt her on the buttocke soft and kist where I did clappe.
And gladder then was I of such a kisse forsooth:
Then I had been to have a kisse of some old lechers mouth.³⁹⁵

The sexual precocity attributed to Juliet is missing, and the account recalls Plutarch “pretty” in a nice capture of the comic quality of babies. The contrived teasing by the nurse's husband, whose remarks would have been incomprehensible to the child, which sexualised an innocent mishap replaces the harmless playfulness of Brooke's nurse.

Susan, whose robustly English name might have been unexpected in Verona, is important to the plot as the means of establishing Juliet's age, about which her mother, significantly, is unsure, though she claims to have been no more than thirteen when she had Juliet. These references to age are not casual but comprise an important theme in the development of the plot. In the first reference to Juliet in the play Capulet questions whether she is old enough for marriage and suggests a couple of years' postponement to Paris whose response, “Younger than she are happy mothers made” may have startled early audiences on two counts: the truth of the statement and the presumed happiness. Capulet's answer “And too soon marred are those so early made” may have seemed more likely (I.ii.12). The emphasis on age continues. Juliet's father is not young, for it should not be hard “For men as old as we to keep the peace” (I.ii.3), he's “past our dancing days”, and it's thirty years since he was “in a mask” (I.v.33). His wife is younger, well under thirty, and the second chorus articulates the connection between age and sexual interest:

Now old desire doth in his deathbed lie,
And young affection gapes to be his heir. (II.i.Chorus)

The nurse by Juliet's calculations has lost her “youthful blood”,

395 Brooke, p. 19.

But old folks, many feign as they were dead -

Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead. (II.v.12)

The occasion for this is Juliet's impatience to hear Romeo's answer when the nurse has been gone for three hours, a point brought out by Mercutio's quibbling about "the prick of noon".

"Perchance she cannot meet him" seems a reasonable explanation for the delay, but putting it down to old age emphasises Juliet's impetuosity which is to lead to disaster.

Juliet is thirteen, and we have some indications of the ages of her parents, though we don't know that of Romeo or of Paris, and Shakespeare must have required her to be so young, for she is sixteen in Brooke's poem and eighteen in another probable source of the play.³⁹⁶ It was not usual in late Elizabethan England for girls of thirteen to marry, and there existed some disapproval of early sexual experience, so that, for example, in an anonymous play of 1605, *Nobody and Somebody* it was stressed how undesirable it would be for girls to lose "their maidenheads at thirteen years".³⁹⁷ In an unpleasant slur on an innkeeper by Lodge, sex in young people was implicitly condemned:

Lucillas daughter, she that keeps the swan,
That saw her mother dallie with her man;
Steale privy sports, for sweet meates hazard fame,
Scarce twelve yeares old begins to do the same.³⁹⁸

Becon thought that marriage at fourteen would jeopardise a girl's health, and advised "honest maides" to control themselves:

Forasmuch as maides no lesse then yonge menne after they come ones to xiiii yeres of age, are

396 Bullough, Vol. I, 27 & 304. A valiant attempt to detect a dramatic structural significance in Juliet's age is J. Karl Franson, "'Too Soon Marr'd': Juliet's Age as Symbol in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Papers on Language & Literature*, 32, no. 3 (1996): 244 - 262. Noting that Juliet Capulet has thirteen letters, that there are thirteen named guests at the Capulets' party, that Romeo calls Juliet by name fourteen times, a theory is developed, not readily summarised, of why all this is not coincidence but central to the play's meaning. Endearing though his argument is, it doesn't affect mine.

397 Anonymous, *No-Body and Some-Body: With the True Chronicle Historie of Elydure, Who Was Fortunately Three Severall Times Crowned King of England* ([London]: Printed for Iohn Trundle, 1606); written c. 1592, sig. E2.

398 Thomas Lodge, *A Fig for Momus* (London: for Clement Knight, 1595), sig. E2.

so desirous to be married ... notwithstanding such untimely mariages are not to be commended ... it shalbe convenient for all honest maides, if they tender the health and conservation of their bodies ... that they labour to the uttermost of their power to suppress that luste and desire in them.³⁹⁹

But, with her age firmly established, Juliet marries anyway, without her parents' knowledge or consent, which brings to the fore the question of precocious sexuality and the nurse's contribution to it.⁴⁰⁰

LOVE, SEX, AND VOCABULARY.

A constant theme in the play is what sex has to do with love. Romeo starts the play in love with Rosaline, which Mercutio dismisses by deriding both Romeo and the literary convention:

Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flow'd in. Laura, to his lady, was a kitchen wench – marry, she had a better love to berhyme her. (II.iv.38)

After Romeo has become separated from his friends as they were leaving the feast, Mercutio shouts “Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!”, and comments

This cannot anger him.. 'Twould anger him
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand
Till she had laid it and conjured it down. (II.i.23)

“Circle” and “stand”, conventional filth, are followed by jokes about medlars, and love is reduced to obscenity. Mercutio's scepticism about the reality of Romeo's feelings for Rosaline is vindicated, of course, when the susceptible Romeo takes one look at Juliet and immediately loses interest in the unobtainable Rosaline.

399 Becon, op, cit., 369.

400 Jill L. Levenson, *Romeo and Juliet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 60 – 69 is a thoughtful account of the theatrical issues of such a young character on stage.

But Juliet is obtainable all right. After a brief courtship consisting of a few minutes' conversation with someone whose name she doesn't know, she is talking of marriage which shortly before she had claimed never to have considered. After their dance, Romeo's enquiry of the nurse receives the unsentimental response about laying hold and the chinks already quoted, then love burgeons in the most famous scene in drama, the familiarity of which tends to mask how little is actually said by the lovers. At the end of it Juliet has, without waiting to be asked, made up her mind:

If that thy bent of love be honourable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow
By one that I'll procure to come to thee
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite (II.ii.143)

Language slips around here. We have already encountered the problems with “honour”, so “honourable” is probably not altogether free of doubtful associations. “Rite” is a common euphemism for coition, and will be used in that sense later in the play. And though “procure” is usually a neutral enough word in Shakespeare, meaning to bring something about, that this something might be sexual is evident from Lucio's words to the pimp Pompey in *Measure for Measure*:

How doth my dear morsel, thy mistress? Procures she still? (III.i.321)

Juliet bears no resemblance to the obdurate Rosalines of convention, so when the nurse approaches Romeo the following day, her errand is readily misunderstood. When she and her servant appear, Romeo hails her with “A sail, a sail”, usually taken to be a comment on how she is dressed. She is then subjected to banter, mostly obscene, until Mercutio picks up the nautical theme with “A bawd, a bawd, a bawd!”, playing on the homophone “board” with its sexual and marine connotations, but also acutely commenting on the nature of the nurse's errand (II.iv.99ff). This is to get Juliet into bed with a man with whom she has had two brief, snatched, conversations, on the basis of which she has decided she wants to marry. Mercutio's joke about the nurse being a bawd moves out of metaphor into something approaching description, and there is a similarity between the nurse's behaviour and that of Pandarus, the epitome of cynicism, in

Troilus and Cressida as he fixes up his niece's night with Troilus, their only night together as it turns out, their love expressed in language as beautiful as any in *Romeo and Juliet*. Pandarus's activities are sordid, those of the lovers are probably not – probably because the speed with which Cressida forgets her exquisitely worded promises leaves them tainted.

It is the singular achievement of *Romeo and Juliet* that it persuades us of the paramountcy of love, and makes audiences discount the accepted morality of early modern England by which Juliet had no business making her own marriage arrangements and misleading her parents to do so. Everybody knew that marriage had three purposes, the avoidance of fornication, the production of children, and companionship. Marriage was

not to be enterprised, nor taken in hande unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfye mennes carnall lustes and appetites, lyke brute beastes that have no understandyng: but reverently, discretely, advisedly, soberly ...⁴⁰¹

As the adverbs pile up it's clear that “unadvisedly” is about right. Juliet had recognised this in the balcony scene when she wouldn't allow Romeo to swear to his integrity, for it was all “too rash, too unadvised” (II.ii.118), and the friar, too, had expressed concerns that “These violent delights have violent ends” (II.vi.9). It is soon obvious that the only purpose of marriage that's going to be achieved in this particular one is the avoidance of fornication, for there is no immediate prospect of companionship when the only practical arrangement the couple has made for life together is to sort out a rope ladder for Romeo to “lay hold of” his bride and to make his getaway when they have finished.⁴⁰²

They are married by the friar, and immediately after the wedding comes the violence in which Mercutio and Tybalt are killed, followed by the banishment of Romeo. Before Juliet gets to hear about this, she makes a speech which is said to have so offended the sensibilities of some Victorian audiences that it was frequently omitted from performances. In it Juliet longs for dusk and the expected pleasures of the wedding night in terms notably short on maidenly modesty. She blushes readily – perhaps she has reason to – and one of her reasons for wanting night is to hide the blood in her cheeks, but there's little trace of the mixture of fear and anticipation with which

401 BCP, p. 157.

402 In the source of the play the couple are given a short “talk” about marriage and its responsibilities, ll 761ff.

brides traditionally approached the marriage bed.⁴⁰³ A character in a Middleton play sums up a bride's correct comportment:

As weeping brides receive their joys at night, ...
With trembling yet with patience.⁴⁰⁴

Even a sexually robust poem by Donne finds it appropriate to reassure the bride

Weep not nor blush, here is no grief nor shame.⁴⁰⁵

Juliet may blush, but there's no weeping and she shows no sign of trembling and certainly none of patience.

The speech is often referred to as an epithalamium, though it's an unusual one because spoken by the bride and makes no mention of marriage.⁴⁰⁶ A number of epithalamia in English survive from the 1590s, by far the best that of Spenser, which follows the bride through the wedding day, starting with her rising from her solitary bed in the morning to a voluptuous description of the bridal bed in which she awaits her husband.⁴⁰⁷ The language is decorous, but the poem is characteristic of the genre in its erotic earnestness: consummating a marriage was a serious business. So John Davies's "Epithalamion for the Marriage of Lady Elizabeth Vere and William Stanley, Earl of Derby", a courtier's bid for favour in the form of a masque, is written in sonnets spoken by the muses, but in it even Erato, the erotic muse, mends her ways: accustomed "to singe of wanton Love", but "nowe I singe of bewty of the minde".⁴⁰⁸

Juliet's longing for night aligns her speech with the epithalamium tradition, and contains

403 Cf. II. ii.85ff and II.v.70.

404 Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Old Law*, ed. Catherine M. Shaw (New York ; London: Garland, 1982), 113.

405 John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne : Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Longman, 2010), 622.

406 Gary M. McCown, "'Runnawayes Eyes' and Juliet's Epithalamium", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 27.2 (1976): 150–70.

407 Edmund Spenser, *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by Ernest De Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), Vol. I, 421ff.

408 Davies, *op. cit.*, 203.

echoes of these poems which are not coincidental, for this a convention with a long history.⁴⁰⁹ One example is in Donne's "Epithalamium Made at Lincoln's Inn", a parody, in places indecent, mocking the conventions he is using, and probably a literary exercise rather than referring to an actual wedding. It includes the usual conceit of welcoming nightfall, but the imagery is strikingly close to Juliet's: referring to the sun, Donne writes

His steeds nill be restrained,
But gallop lively down the western hill;
Thou shalt, when he hath run the world's half frame,
Tonight put on perfection, and a woman's name.⁴¹⁰

(The last line is the poem's refrain.) The image is an obvious one so there's no reason to assume any borrowing or direct influence, but another echo is less easy to dismiss. Davies's poem, though its grovelling tone is quite unlike Juliet's soliloquy, shares with it a metaphor which might suggest at least a common source. Davies hopes for his couple:

Longe shall you shine on earth, like Lampes of heaven,
Which when you Leave, I will you stellifie;
To you sweet bride, shall Hebes place be given ...⁴¹¹

This resembles Juliet's plea for night to give her Romeo, and "Take him and cut him out in little stars", and together with the Donne echo might suggest that Juliet's speech has a formulaic element which undermines its intensity, an impression reinforced by the recollection of Mercutio's Queen Mab monologue in the references to steeds, whip, wagon, and night.⁴¹²

Juliet's speech, however, is entirely different from a conventional epithalamium in two respects. One is the absence of a description of the public rituals and celebrations of a

409 Virginia Tufte, *The Poetry of Marriage: The Epithalamium in Europe and Its Development in England* (Los Angeles: Tinnon-Brown, 1970) shows that Catullus supplied the prototype for most subsequent exercises in the genre.

410 Donne, *The Complete Poems*, 618f. My reading of this poem as parody is not generally accepted. Phoebus "steeds" are in Brooke, fol. 26v.

411 Davies, *op cit.*, 202ff.

412 Nicholas Brooke, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies* (London: Methuen, 1968), 84f.

conventional wedding which end in putting the bride to bed. Spenser's wedding day is crowded with people singing and dancing, boys running "up and downe the street", shouting "Hymen io Hymen, Hymen" (ll. 137ff). It ends with the "disaray" of the bride, with her being laid in "odour'd sheetes", with the welcoming of night and its privacy, and finally with prayers for a peaceful and fertile union. Romeo's rope ladder is a meagre substitute for the pleasures of sociability.

The second difference is that conventional wedding hymns invariably include this wish that the couple will be fertile, a reminder of one of the three purposes of marriage. Capulet's conversation with Paris, and his wife's introduction of the subject to Juliet, both bring out the importance of children for marriage, but there's nothing about this in Juliet's speech, nor anywhere in the, admittedly brief, conversations between the lovers, or in either of their comments on their relationships. So with the template from the Prayer Book and the conventions of the epithalamia for comparison, it would have been clear to an Elizabethan audience that this marriage was unpromising. Like Cressida and Troilus, the star-crossed lovers' married life together amounted to a single night, and Troilus watching Cressida "above" may even have been intended as a visual joke about the balcony scene in what had become a major success for Shakespeare (though there's actually no mention of a balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*), a sardonic comment on the reality of love.

Grove has described "the absolute directness with which Juliet commits herself to love and its physical expression", one view of the matter, but Bly has argued convincingly that Juliet's speech, and her uninhibited behaviour generally, cleared the way for a new type of dramatic heroine, what she calls "lustful virgins".⁴¹³ It is, she observed, difficult to think of any comparable sexually frank young women in plays earlier than *Romeo and Juliet*, though imitations soon followed, probably inspired by its success. There is, certainly, nothing indirect about

O I have bought the mansion of a love,
But not possessed it; and though I am sold,
Not yet enjoyed.

Once again, however, the language is unstable, the directness of a sort to which, in Gertrude's

⁴¹³ Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592-1604* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63; Groves gets in a bit of a muddle with wormwood, which she confuses with gall. Mary Bly, 'Bawdy Puns and Lustful Virgins: The Legacy of Juliet's Desire in Comedies of the Early 1600s', in *Shakespeare Survey*, 49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 97-109.

words, “liberal shepherds give a grosser name”. “Mansion”, for instance, sometimes has an obscene meaning, and for much of the speech can be found examples of the less elevated language that is the stock-in-trade of Mercutio and the nurse.⁴¹⁴ In

Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die ...

“die” is a common word for orgasm, and the double meanings in the speech accumulate: “rites” (picking up on the end of the balcony scene), “unmanned”, “come” (repeatedly), “leap”, and so on.⁴¹⁵

At this point the significance of the language of the nurse and of Mercutio becomes clear. Logan Pearsall Smith gives a charming description of the moment when the penny dropped and he got the point of the medlar, and was able to “join in the learned giggles”.⁴¹⁶ “Learned” is the key word, for the connotations of a medlar now need some tracking down, a service a number of scholars have been happy to provide, though not all, and Johnson's magisterial comment is worth repeating:

The rest is a series of quibbles unworthy of explanation, which he who does not understand needs not lament his ignorance.⁴¹⁷

The general sense of Mercutio's speech, however, does not depend on a line by line paraphrase:

If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.
Now will he sit under a medlar tree,
And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit
As maids call medlars, when they laugh alone.
Romeo, that she were, O, that she were

An open et caetera, thou a poperin pear.⁴¹⁸ (II.i.34)

414 John Marston, *The Poems*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), 54; I cite this mainly because Williams didn't spot it.

415 “I” is a disputed reading; some editors prefer “hee” from Q4, but either way the reference to orgasm survives.

416 Logan Pearsall Smith, *On Reading Shakespeare* (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1933), 17

417 Johnson, *Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare*, 137.

418 “et caetera” is a well known crux, usually, bewilderingly, amended to “open arse”.

This is part of the derision of the Petrarchan version of love which at this stage Romeo is committed to, and which provides the linguistic underpinning of the play. Immediately after the nurse has finished telling the story of the infant Juliet's fall and delivered herself of the "honour" impropriety, Juliet's mother uses very different language to urge the merits of Paris:

What say you? can you love the gentleman?
This night you shall behold him at our feast;
Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face,
And find delight writ there with beauty's pen;
Examine every married lineament,
And see how one another lends content
And what obscured in this fair volume lies
Find written in the margent of his eyes.
This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him, only lacks a cover:
The fish lives in the sea, and 'tis much pride
For fair without the fair within to hide:
That book in many's eyes doth share the glory,
That in gold clasps locks in the golden story;
So shall you share all that he doth possess,
By having him, making yourself no less. (I.iii.81)

The speech continues in rhyming couplets to emphasise its poetic quality, and the play is full of language of this sort, highly metaphorical, elevated in sentiment, and altogether artificial.⁴¹⁹

Placing this speech alongside the vulgarity of the nurse's double entendres establishes that there are two different registers in the play, the high-minded conventionality of the Petrarchan and the coarseness of the nurse and Mercutio.⁴²⁰ The two kinds of language roughly correspond to love

419 Jill L. Levenson, 'The Definition of Love: Shakespeare's Phrasing in "Romeo and Juliet"', *Shakespeare Studies* 15 (1982): 21–36 is an excellent analysis of the play's "elevated" language.

420 "Double entendres" seems to be an acceptable plural (according to OED); the phrases appears to be unfamiliar to native French speakers.

and lust, a distinction that runs through the early part of the play, so that “this fair volume” is much the same thing as “a poperin pear”.

The reason for the unsentimental language and ideas of the nurse and Mercutio is not just to amuse the groundlings or to give Pearsall Smith the “learned giggles”, but to attune the audience's ears to the two registers. The Queen Mab speech has often been taken to be an irrelevant exercise in bravura, but it has the structural function of training an audience to catch indecencies in the fantasy, starting with the notorious double meaning of “queen”. The earthy language, therefore, has a didactic purpose of insisting on the carnal reality attendant on the disembodied love for the likes of Rosaline. The beauty of the aubade as the lovers part for the last time is set in the context of what they have been doing, and Romeo's response to Juliet's invitation to come back to bed contains a wry echo of her earlier anticipation:

I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

Juliet's speech while waiting for her bridegroom is a forthright and unprurient recognition that the sexual act is often a synthesis of love and desire, a physical expression of intense affection, but the speech is nevertheless littered with words with indecent possibilities immediately recognisable to an Elizabethan playgoer. The effect is to synthesise desire and longing, to bring together love and lust not to distinguish them. The coarse undertone to Juliet's bridal enthusiasm destabilises any implied difference between love as beautiful and lust as ugly. The language of the Prayer Book assigned lust to brute beasts, and marked out what went on in the marriage bed as something altogether different. Juliet, indeed, makes perfunctory acknowledgement that sex within marriage doesn't compromise chastity:

Think true love acted simple modesty.

“Acted” does a lot of work, with the basic meaning of “enacted”, in the sense of putting into practice, but it also implies a dramatic performance, and, inevitably, the sexual act. Juliet's wedding night, she repeatedly observes, is going to happen with the light off, which brings to mind “the act of darkness”, and unsettles the truth of Juliet's assertion.⁴²¹ So this one line

⁴²¹ *King Lear*, III.iv.88.

exemplifies the way in which the entire speech can have its meanings distorted by the possibilities in how its vocabulary might be heard by “dirty ears”.⁴²²

RESPONSIBILITY.

The fusing of the carnal and the spiritual in Juliet's epithalamium is in the tradition of the genre, but its context contains a witty parody. Although the play's language insistently holds together love and lust within desire, most daringly in Juliet's anticipation of Romeo's arrival, the tradition is a narrative of the bride and groom progressing separately towards bed. This is reduced in *Romeo and Juliet* to the comic prospect of Romeo shinning up a rope ladder to get to his bride, part of the cynical undermining of the romantic earnestness started with the implications of the sonnet at the start of the play. Sex, the play makes clear, is at once serious and a bit absurd.

Sexual desire, particularly that of Juliet, ends in tragedy, however, which leads to the chain of moral responsibility for what happens. In Brooke's poem the unfortunate apothecary is hanged and the nurse is consigned to a nunnery, but *Romeo and Juliet* explicitly does not end with an audit of who is to blame: “Some shall be pardoned, and some punished” is how the Prince leaves it, and the audience must do its own moral assessments. Where might the nurse be in these? She passes out of the play as it moves to its conclusion, and had ceased to matter to the plot after she abandoned Juliet. She is silent in the final act, though in some productions she is shown as a panic-stricken spectator to events which her actions have helped bring about. The friar ungallantly implicates her in the dramatically clumsy speech in which he explains what has happened and acknowledges his own responsibility in it, but the Prince makes it clear that the friar is to be let off (“We still have known thee for a holy man” V.i.270), so it looks as if the nurse may be in trouble. As well she might be, for not only did she make no attempt to restrain Juliet, but she actively encouraged behaviour which ended in tragedy. This takes us back to what nurses were supposed to be like.

The tragedy is set in train by Juliet's disregard for conventional standards of behaviour. She had virtuously assured her mother of her tractability in the matter of marriage:

⁴²² And still she [Philomel] cried, and still the world pursues, / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears”: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll 102f.

I'll look to like, if looking liking move:
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly. (I.iii.99)

She doesn't bother about her parents' consent when it comes to Romeo, just as his love for Rosaline evaporates as soon as he sets eyes on Juliet. Juliet's subsequent course involves a systematic misleading of her parents culminating in a marriage they know nothing about, abetted by her nurse, whose responsibilities can hardly have included deceiving her employers. In this she performs the traditional function of the literary nurse in furthering the sexual adventures of her charge.

Theatrically, the nurse belongs with an established literary character type. She came with the plot, for she was present in Shakespeare's source, but nurses are common in western literature, and Juliet's has a long pedigree. In Homer the former nurse of Telemachus helped him evade his mother's suitors.⁴²³ In Greek tragedy, Orestes's old nurse in *The Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus is a semi-comic figure who could well be the model for Juliet's nurse, though there's little chance that Shakespeare can have known the play. Phaedra's nurse in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides is a resourceful woman active in pursuing her mistress's semi-incestuous pursuit of her stepson, and much later a similar role is performed in Ovid's story of an old nurse guiding Myrrha's to her father's bed. Elsewhere in Ovid, Canace's incest with her brother led to the birth of a child which her nurse attempted to smuggle out of the palace to conceal what had happened. These two nurses from Ovid will have been known in Shakespeare's time, as will have been those in Seneca's tragedies, in two of which, *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, nurses performed the same functions as their Greek originals, and, indeed, nurses appear in four of Seneca's *Tenne Tragedies*.⁴²⁴ In all these examples the nurses remained in the family after their initial functions had been completed, and all seem to be characterised by an individualised morality which allowed them to set up incest, for example, but in the service of loyalty taking precedence over other values.

The immediate source of Juliet's nurse is probably Gascoigne's *Supposes*, a translation of a play by Ariosto, and widely accepted as a source of *The Taming of the Shrew*. It's a comedy of

423 *Odyssey*, Book II.

424 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *His Tenne Tragedies: Translated into English*, ed. Thomas Newton (London: Constable, 1927); the plays are *Medea*, *Agamemnon*, *Hippolyta*, and *Octavia* (this last is no longer thought to be the work of Seneca).

disguised lovers and mistaken identity in which the heroine, who scarcely appears after the first scene, is Polynesta, sleeping with Dulyppo, ostensibly a servant in her father's household, but actually there in disguise to get access to his mistress. The affair is organised and protected by the nurse Balia, bribed to do so, though offended by the suggestion that it was money not romance that motivated her:

Well you my judge of Nourse as you liste: In deed I have thought it alwayes a deede of charitie to helpe the miserable yong men, whose tender youth consumeth with the furious flames of love

Polynesta's reply makes clear what is happening:

No of honestie, I pray you, who first brought him into my chamber? Who first taught him the way to my bed but you?⁴²⁵

The couple are caught in bed together and the supposed servant and the nurse are thrown in prison until it eventually turns out that he is actually of good family, at which point a spot of premarital fornication becomes of no great importance.

The nurse's presence in *Romeo and Juliet*, therefore, is in part as a traditional literary figure with conventional characteristics, among them a readiness to pander to sexual irregularity, as do her counterparts in Ovid. This has the effect of associating Juliet with Myrrha and Phaedra, tragic figures destroyed by lust with the connivance of their nurses, an uncomfortable pairing for a romantic innocent, but one likely to have occurred to some members in early audiences, and probably to the author himself. This particular nurse's morals, however, have a wider significance than her readiness to ignore her clear responsibility to alert the Capulets to their daughter's infatuation, and to foster a romance which she should have been concerned to thwart (as *should* the friar). This significance comes from her original function as wetnurse.

The nurse's ultimate betrayal of Juliet cancels out any residual amiability she may have acquired earlier in the play, and puts her with the women whose shortcomings were listed in

425 George Gascoigne, *A Hundred Sundry Flowers* (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), 2; first published 1573.

Elizabeth Clinton's book and the body of writing summed up in it. With knowledge of this scapegoating of wetnurses, and of their functions in plays, Juliet's nurse may well have been seen as a sinister figure, an irresponsible procuress representative of a literary class of amoral brokers of sexual misdemeanours, and of the venal, mendacious, and indolent stereotype assigned to her profession. Her behaviour in the play subverts the social and domestic order, and her final intervention in the plot, urging Juliet to accept Paris, continues this. The love of Juliet and Romeo had been sanctioned by the church, so the nurse's pragmatism was tainted by irreligion, and there was also the possibility that Juliet might be pregnant, and the nurse's encouraging Juliet to marry Paris while aware of this further threatened stability by foisting another man's child on him. In the background, therefore, is the nurse of fiction, and the foreboding of Gellius and others about the substitution of babies to be brought up by deceived parents.

This unfriendly characterisation goes against most modern representations of the nurse in performance, in which the epithet “earthy” seems invariably to find a place in programme notes, and this reading of her as essentially entertaining is traditional. Dr Johnson was much taken with her, though obviously thought he had some explaining to do about this:

The nurse is one of the characters in which the author delighted; he has, with great subtilty of distinction, drawn her at once loquacious and secret, obsequious and insolent, trusty and dishonest.⁴²⁶

But there is little “subtilty of distinction” in Juliet's language when she repudiates the nurse, which draws on the language of sin, hell and damnation:

Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend!
Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,
Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue
Which she hath praised him with above compare
So many thousand times? Go, counsellor;
Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain. (III.v.235)

426 Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. William K. Wimsatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 138.

The ultimate disloyalty of Juliet's nurse distinguishes her from her literary counterparts whose loyalty usually overrode other moral obligations, and adds to her negative image. Few Shakespearean characters are straightforwardly virtuous or evil, and the nurse within the life of the play may have had traditional bad associations but it would be a travesty to insist on these to the exclusion of the comedy of her speech and behaviour, but Johnson's image of her ignores her malevolence.

It would also be a travesty to see Juliet as nothing more than a libidinous thirteen-year-old, but it is nevertheless the case that her sexual enthusiasm is a major factor in causing the tragedy. The heavy emphasis on how young she is comments on this enthusiasm, and as if to make sure, her father indirectly reintroduces the subject in his tirade when she is resisting marriage to Paris. Calling her “green-sickness carrion” (III.v.156) is a reference to a supposed affliction of celibate young women for which the remedy was copulation, and as well as being an exceptionally offensive way of describing a daughter, it has the effect of drawing further attention to Juliet's age, which is again mentioned later in the scene (“I cannot love,/I am too young”). The sexual avidity which had such tragic consequences and which is set out with such candour in her invocation of the night, therefore, was awakened early.

The nurse, as we have seen, had found much entertainment in what she saw as indications of sexual precocity in Juliet as a toddler, and there is indication that the nurse's own sexual activity started at an early age, if this is what her reference to her maidenhead at twelve year old indicates. This brings me back to the belief that moral and emotional attributes could be passed from nurse to child by the milk:

A newe vessell, will long time savour of that licour, that is first powred into it: so the Infant will ever smell of the nurses maners having tasted of her milke. . . . As the moisture and sappe of the earth doth change the nature of that Tree or plant that it nourisheth: so the wit and discretion of a childe is altered and changed by the milke of the Nurse.⁴²⁷

The language and imagery here are close to those of the friar when he refers to “the earth that's nature's mother” and develops the extended metaphor about plants “sucking on her natural

⁴²⁷ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia : Wits Treasury Being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth* (London: for Cuthbert Burbie, 1598), 64.

bosom” and drawing their characteristics from her (II.iii.5).

There is another small detail which adds to the picture. One thing nurses were expected to do was practise celibacy for it was supposed that sexual activity would pollute the milk.⁴²⁸ Juliet's nurse's husband is not mentioned in Brooke's poem, but in the play his presence when the child was small is emphasised, so the dramatically superfluous reference to the husband's presence there would alert anyone familiar with the prescriptions about nursing that there could have been another source of contamination.

CONCLUSION.

An Elizabethan audience might, therefore, have perceived Juliet as a child corrupted by her nurse, the woman's amorality and sexual appetite imbibed from her milk. Sexual impetuosity and precociousness would be explained by this means, for as, Jeremy Taylor had warned, a child was liable to acquire a tendency to “peevisness, to lust, to drunkenness, to pride, to low and base demeanours, to stubbornness”, some of which might be said to fit Juliet. As well as transmitting her own faults of character as she was feeding the baby the nurse was also reproducing the literary function of nurses in subverting conventional morality to further the sexual adventures of their charges.

Clinton and the rest made much of the naturalness of breastfeeding, meaning not that it was a biological given, but that it was natural in the normative sense with which we have become familiar, with the additional connotation that for Christians the provision of milk was ordained by God. Employing a wetnurse, therefore, was a moral action, seen by many as abrogating motherhood and its natural function. Most people in early audiences could probably not have afforded to use a wetnurse, so there may have been some recognition of the questionable morality of the Capulets in entrusting their daughter's nurture to a woman about whom they had abundant warning from centuries of writing on the subject. A chain of causality linking the decision to introduce a nurse into the family to the bodies in the tomb would add to the Capulet's responsibility for the tragedy by attempting to coerce Juliet into marriage which was its immediate precipitant.

⁴²⁸ Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book : Or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered : Directing Childbearing Women How to Behave Themselves in Their Conception, Breeding, Bearing, and Nursing of Children* (London: for Simon Miller, 1671), 365.

Caligula's nurse put blood on her nipple to give him a taste for it. Juliet's last experience of her nurse's milk was, literally, a bitter one, for the nurse had abruptly weaned her by putting wormwood on her nipple with, for the nurse, an amusing reaction:

When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple
Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,
To see it tetchy and fall out with the dug. (I.iii.31)

The alliteration on “t” emphasises the paradox of bitter and pretty, and wormwood has ominous associations. The lips of a strange woman, “that is, an harlot” glosses the Geneva Bible, “drop as an honie combe”, but the pleasure is brief, for

the end of her is bitter as worme wood, & sharpe as a two edged sword.⁴²⁹

The symbolism borders on the inept.

429 *Proverbs*, V:4

CHAPTER SEVEN.

“A KIND OF LAWFUL ADULTERY”: REMARRIAGE IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA AND PREJUDICE.

Everyone hearing the couple at an early modern wedding make their promises “till death us departe” was aware of the melancholy truth that the departure was likely to be sooner rather than later.⁴³⁰ The fragility of life in the period meant that there were a lot of widows and widowers, and numerous children who had lost one or both parents. There are inevitably, therefore, plenty of widows, though fewer widowers, in plays, not for the most part amiable characters, often comic, sometimes vicious, but seldom sympathetically portrayed. Widowers and widowers as parents, as bereaved adults with dependants, are rare in drama.

We know more about widows and widowers, and about remarriage, than about any of the other family relationships so far discussed. Most importantly, we know that the bereaved tended to remarry, often with alacrity. In early modern London more than two thirds of widows remarried within a year of losing their husbands (they were less hasty in villages). People told fibs to cover up how soon they were remarrying, for comparing when people claimed to have been bereaved with when they actually had been showed a strong tendency to exaggerate: someone who was supposed to have lost a spouse a year before had often in fact done so five months earlier, and half a year meant more like two months.⁴³¹ This may be an indication that there was a conventional period of waiting to be got round (it might be important to be sure that a potential wife was not pregnant by her late husband), but in many cases the urgency of finding a new breadwinner or someone to look after children must have over-ridden other considerations. Outbreaks of plague in 1593 and 1603 probably caused a surge in the number of widows and widowers, and a widow left with children could soon fall into poverty, and a widower's children might experience neglect.

430 BCP, p. 159.

431 Vivien Brodsky Elliott, ‘Widows in Late Elizabethan London : Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientations’, in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard Michael Smith, and Keith Wrightson, eds., *The World We Have Gained : Histories of Population and Social Structure : Essays Presented to Peter Laslett on His Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 122-154; Charles Carlton, ‘The Widow’s Tale: Male Myths and Female Reality in 16th and 17th Century England’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10, no. 2 (1978): 118–29; Jeremy Boulton, ‘London Widowhood Revisited: The Decline of Female Remarriage in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, *Continuity and Change* 5, 3 (December 1990): 323.

Gertrude, therefore, was in good company, and audiences knew it, and knew also that her son's objections belonged with a general rhetoric about remarriage, especially that of women, which had little to do with what actually went on, for all that the vilification of remarriage, particularly that of widows, was everywhere. A representative example is the character of an "ordinary" widow, probably by John Webster; her mourning was brief:

The end of her Husband begins in teares, and the end of her teares beginnes in a Husband. ... Her chiefst pride is in the multitude of her Suitors; and by them she gaines: for one serves to draw on another, and with one at last she shootes out another, as Boies doe Pellets in Elderne Gunnes. ... Lastly, while she is a Widdow, observe ever, shee is no Morning woman the evening a good fire and sack may make her listen to a Husband: and if ever she be made sure, tis upon a full stomacke to bedward.⁴³²

Vain, lecherous, indulgent: Webster's sneers are of a piece with Hamlet's objecting to the speed of his mother's remarriage, to her choice of a man clearly inferior to his predecessor, and to her interest in sex at an age when she should be past it (this despite the strong hint from the well-informed ghost that little of that sort of thing was going on).

There is, therefore, a contradiction between something routine and unremarkable and the rhetoric about it which everybody knew to be specious. Gertrude was unusual in who she remarried but in nothing else. There are a number of components to the rhetoric. The first is the idealisation of the state of widowhood to be found in Webster's companion piece, the *Character of a Virtuous Widow*:

A vertuous widdow is the Palme-tree that thrives not after the supplanting of her husband. For her Childrens sake she first marries, for shee married that shee might have children, and for their sakes shee marries no more. She is like the purest gold, onely imploide for Princes meddals: shee never receives but one impression ...⁴³³

The disheartening suggestion that widows should become animated gravestones didn't, as we've seen, catch on, but alongside the idealisation went the other central allegations in the rhetoric, the

432 Thomas Overbury, *Sir Thomas Overburie His Wife* (London: for Laurence L'isle, 1616), sig. L4.

433 *Ibid.*, sig. L3.

sexual rampancy of widows and the insincerity of their grief.

In Chapter 3 I quoted Enobarbus's tasteless observation that the death of Antony's wife had its consolations, so it is necessary to make the possibly cynical point that in some cases the grief was indeed factitious, for there must have been cases when the death of a spouse came as a relief, even a pleasure, when it put an end to a miserable relationship. Even when the grief was real it was often, perhaps usually, ambivalent, and the classic study of bereavement established what most people already knew but preferred to keep to themselves, that there are almost invariably mixed feelings when someone dies.⁴³⁴ There is, however, little of the empathetic about the violent derision of the perceived insincerity of widows. A particularly unpleasant example, selected almost at random, illustrates the point:

There is another kind of servile dissimulation; which proceeds from base tenacious natures: such we see commonly in our covetous Widdowes; who with an Onion in the nooke of their napkin, can make a sowre face, and pretend a Sea of sorrow: when the thought of a next Husband ha's seized on their hearts. What aboundance of teares will these dissembling Chrones shed over their languishing Husbands? What scalding sighes? What heart-rending groanes? ... Yet will these cunningly disguise their solace, and with teare-blubber'd visards close up his eies, and infinitely rejoyce in this last office. Then must they at his internment seemingly desire to be buried with him; rave, and look distractedly, as if fancy had brought them to a frenzy; leape into the Grave; and perform all these pageants with such a complete grace; as not a Neighbour attends them, but suffers with them: commending their kinde hearts, for leaving with such unwilling hearts their faithfull Husbands.⁴³⁵

The gross misogyny is unmissable, and recurs in the interminable jokes and the plain nastiness about the alleged sexual urgency that drives widows to remarry.

434 Erich Lindemann, 'Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101, no. 2 (1 September 1944): 141–48; this frequently reprinted paper was based on work with the families of nearly 500 people killed in a nightclub fire in Boston, Massachusetts. It charted how mourning usually went through predictable stages towards eventual acceptance and a readiness to move on. For obvious reasons such a "study" is not likely to be repeated, but it seems to resonate with common experience.

435 Richard Brathwaite, *Ar't Asleepe Husband? : A Boulster Lecture : Stored with All Variety of Witty Jeasts, Merry Tales, and Other Pleasant Passages ...* (London: for R.B., 1640), 138f. Using an onion to cause insincere tears is a familiar accusation; see, for example, John Swan, *Speculum Mundi· Or A Glasse Representing the Face of the World : ...* (Cambridge: Universitie of Cambridge, 1635), 265.

Since there is nothing intrinsically amusing about bereavement, these jokes were about its consequences. To give a relatively harmless example of the humour generated by randy widows in a hurry, at the end of Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* Mulligrub, a guileless vintner, is being led out to execution when the supposed hangman puts a question to Mistress Mulligrub:

I am a widdower, and you are almost a widdow, shal I be welcom to your houses, to your tables, and your other things?

The suggestion is well received:

I have a peece of mutton and a featherbed for you at all times, I pray make hast.⁴³⁶

The humour, such as it is, comes from the behaviour of the bereaved, the heartless rapidity with which they got over their losses (“A little month; or e'er those shoes were old ...”), and their sexual eagerness (“With such dexterity to incestuous sheets”...).⁴³⁷ (In the Marston play Mulligrub lives to be made a fool of another day and patches things up with his wife.)

The purported hangman is a widower, so there is at least some symmetry between him and Mrs Mulligrub, but the opprobrium attaching to the remarriage of a widower was noticeably more muted. There were in fact probably more widows than widowers around, because men tended to be older and less long lived than their wives, but that would hardly account for the different reputations, nor for the virtual absence of widowers *qua* widowers in plays of the period.⁴³⁸ Nothing is made of the presumably widowed state of Lear and Gloucester, for example, but a widow is invariably identified as one even when it doesn't matter to the plot.

Remarriage often involved moral issues far more important than this puerile assumption that the average widow couldn't wait to resume the pleasures of the marriage bed and soon forgot her

436 John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan*, ed. Peter Davison (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), V.iii.89; this is the same joke that we encountered in *The Old Law*, when Gnotho drops his wife off to be hanged on his way to marry her successor..

437 The parentheses are from *Hamlet*, I.ii.147 & 157.

438 Thomas L. Berger and William C. Bradford, *An Index of Characters in Early Modern English Drama : Printed Plays, 1500-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) lists 84 widows but only 3 widowers in their period. Their work, however, is based on lists of *dramatis personae*, not on analysis of the plays themselves, which limits its usefulness; even so, the discrepancy is obvious.

husband in her inordinate desire. Whether to marry in the first place was not a difficult decision, for it was expected that everyone would, and any moral dilemmas turned on the choice of whom to marry and how the choice was made. Remarriage, however, was likely to involve children, and when there were dependent children, remarriage was not just a private matter between two adults. Webster's virtuous widow remained single for the sake of her children, though he doesn't explain how this would serve their interests, and in many cases a mother's remarriage would benefit her children by replacing one breadwinner by another. This must have been widely recognised, and is occasionally acknowledged:

Dost thou see also, some wise and discrete widdowes that so match themselves, as their husbands kindred receive credit, and their husbands children benefit by their second husbands? Why then wilt thou mistrust thy wife without cause? And thinke that she will prove fond an indiscreet with some, not wise and prudent with others?⁴³⁹

The writer went on to make it clear that widows should be careful about whom they married, and that men should usually avoid widows.

If the children's welfare was inextricably tied up in their parents' decisions, this was of little interest to dramatists, and stepchildren are rare in plays of the period: Hamlet and Innogen both have their lives affected by a parent's remarriage, but they were adults at the time of the action of the play, not vulnerable children. This lack of interest in the predicament of children who have lost a parent continues in modern discussion, so that Panek, who has written extensively and with great intelligence on widows in early modern drama has virtually nothing to say about their children.⁴⁴⁰

WHY NOT REMARRY?

Just as we have empirical evidence to locate the dramatic representation of remarriage, so we have abundant evidence of the stereotypes I have been describing, and a lot of material about actual remarriages from diaries and letters, though this is too piecemeal to be more than informative gossip. There is also reason to believe that some serious thinking went on in the

⁴³⁹ William Whately, *A Bride-Bush. Or, A Direction for Married Persons* (London: Benjamin Fisher, 1623), 185f.

⁴⁴⁰ Panek's work is discussed below.

midst of the frivolity, though the intellectual base of this is necessarily flimsy in the absence of scriptural support for permanent mourning. It's hard to draw much general guidance on remarriage from the case of Onan, instructed to marry his brother's widow but reluctant to make her pregnant. Taking steps to avoid doing so, he displeased God, “wherefore He slew him also”.⁴⁴¹ Just as indeterminate is the story of Ruth, a widow who marries for a second time, though she is unquestionably a virtuous woman whose life might be taken as an endorsement of remarriage.⁴⁴² In *Deuteronomy* a man is, effectively, required to marry his brother's widow, in *Leviticus* he is forbidden to.⁴⁴³ In early Christianity a widow who remarries is not an adulteress, but St Paul took a dim view of a man who had married his father's widow, though he was more concerned about the church's “glorying” in it than the act itself.⁴⁴⁴ The Apostle was not in any case an enthusiast for marriage (“It is good for a man not to touch a woman”), though he recognised it was a necessary means of avoiding fornication. Best, he thought, “that all men were even as I myself”, but not everybody had his gift:

I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.⁴⁴⁵

This grudging endorsement of marriage and remarriage carries within it the seed of much of the misogynist treatment of widows by laying down that celibacy is the best course for them and that by remarrying they are demonstrating a lack of self control. Elsewhere in the Epistles this negative approach to bereaved women continues; for though it seems that the early churches had systems for looking after widows, at least elderly pious ones, younger ones with a tendency to “wax wanton” were expected to remarry.⁴⁴⁶ It is the case, though, that the New Testament attitude to widows is unclear to the point of obscurity. (St Paul, by the way, shows no interest in what happens to children at remarriage.) Trying to put together a theological case against remarriage was an uphill task.

If the rapidity with which many people remarried had more to do with practical necessity than nymphomania, the cause of this necessity will often have been children. The introduction of step-

441 *Genesis*, XXVIII: 8 – 10.

442 *Ruth*, *passim*.

443 See Note 315.

444 *Romans*, VII: 3; *I Cor.*, V: 1 – 7.

445 *I Cor.*, VII: *passim*, esp. 8 – 9.

446 *I Tim.*, V: 3 – 16.

parents, in many cases with children of their own, was a common event with unpredictable consequences, but there were plenty of stepchildren around: in one Nottingham village almost one in five children were stepchildren⁴⁴⁷. Just as canards about widows were a vapid trope belied by everyday experience, so step-parents performed a necessary function for which many children had cause to feel grateful. There was one step-child, however, who felt little gratitude and left an extensive account of his grievances. His complaints may perhaps not have aroused the sympathy he was no doubt looking for, but is of interest because it raises several of the issues involved in remarriage with little of the usual misogyny. *Newnams Nightcrowe* of 1590 is an eloquent and tendentious polemic the gist of which is contained in the long title.⁴⁴⁸ The author's widowed father had married again, and thereby had subjected his resentful son to “the assaultes, dammage, injury, discomfortes, and unkindness of a stepdame, by her overmuch prevailing” for more than twenty years.⁴⁴⁹ The last straw was when he was disappointed in receiving “some meane or competent portion” so he decided to write about it in order to enlighten people, but also, evidently, to let off steam.⁴⁵⁰

Mothers who remarried caused their children little trouble, or at least so Newnham supposed (he was sparing in his use of full stops):

And to say the troth, for the most part children have not so much cause to dislike with their owne mothers second marying, as with their fathers: seeing by the dicease of the Father they have that which pertaineth, or they might looke for: but not so when the mother departeth first. For in that case there is a new worlde towards, and a turning of al upsi[d]e downe, if the Father be not constant in observing the law of nature and provident in avoiding such evils and hinderances, as by another marying are like to ensue to his present children, ... the covetous and contentious endeavour of a Stepmother, will make all his children sing woe and weale away, she purposeth to bestow her time and night worke so well, that she will raise uppe new plants and fruite that shall soon be ripe, but in the meane time she wilbe so bolde, as to crop the others and to keepe them as much as she can from any good increase, & over this at length

447 Peter Laslett, ‘Parental Deprivation in the Past: A Note on the History of Orphans in England’, *Local Population Studies* 13 (1974): 11.

448 John Newnham, *Newnams Nightcrowe : A Bird That Breedeth Braules in Many Families and Housholdes. Wherein Is Remembred That Kindely and Provident Regard Which Fathers Ought to Have towards Their Sonnes. Together with a Diciphring of the Iniurious Dealinges of Some Younger Sorte of Stepdames* (London: Priuted [sic] by Iohn Wolfe, 1590). The author's name is given as Newnham in EEBO and ESTC, not as on the title page.

449 Ibid., sig. A2; the text later becomes paginated.

450 Ibid., sig. A2v.

perhaps utterly to supplant and plucke them up quite by the rootes.⁴⁵¹

Widows who remarried, in short, did not affect inheritance. Remarrying fathers were another matter, and Newnham sets out at some length why this was so.

I've not been able to find any information about Newnham, though he was clearly well educated. His book is something of a pastiche in which scriptural quotations are usually in Latin, and there are several references to saints' lives. This may indicate that he was a Roman Catholic, which would explain why there is no record of him at a university or inn-of-court. The ecclesiastical disapproval of remarriage he cites is that of the Latin and Greek churches in which it is "rejected" and he notes that the Council of "Neocesaria" banned priests from officiating at remarriages.⁴⁵² His Catholicism, if such it is, could be significant, for disapproval of all marriage was a feature of a pre-Reformation theology which celebrated virginity, and Mikesell has argued that permanent widowhood remained the preferred condition in post-Reformation Roman Catholicism.⁴⁵³

Newnham's grievances are the starting point of his book, but he is concerned to extend the lessons of his own experience beyond the simply personal. He sets out a logical argument to show how his father made the wrong moral choice in remarrying, essentially because sexual incontinence had led him to do so. One consideration Newnham Senior should have regarded was the inevitable malevolence of stepmothers, though Newnham prefers the word "stepdame" because there is nothing maternal about them.⁴⁵⁴ Stepdames control their husbands, and "must be soothed in all thinges or else will followe but colde kissing", they create friction between fathers and children, and evidence of the universality of their spitefulness can be found in its frequency in history and mythology.⁴⁵⁵

Drawing on scripture and Christian tradition, Newnham sets out to establish the importance of fathers setting a good example to children, who must not be provoked to wrath, as would happen

451 Ibid., p. 33.

452 Ibid., p. 35; The Synod of Neocaesarea, a city in what is now Turkey, took place in 315, and laid down rules for the conduct of church members. It is no doubt relevant that the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 344.

453 Margaret Lael Mikesell, 'Catholic and Protestant Widows in "The Duchess of Malfi"', *Renaissance and Reformation* 19, no. 4 (1983): 265 – 279.

454 Newnham, 27.

455 Ibid., 25

if fathers disposed of their wealth in an arbitrary way. All this is grounded in the threefold laws of God, of man, and of nature.⁴⁵⁶ In particular, and shifting the sources of authority, nature, reason and order require men to dispose of their goods properly, that is, to their children, and men should look to the birds to learn how they should behave: the now familiar example of storks caring for elderly parents is dragged in (it's not clear how this is relevant to Newnham's argument). Newnham's father's remarriage, therefore, was reprehensible because it offended against the laws of nature in alienating his son, and disturbed the human laws by breaching the orderliness which defined paternal relationships with children and vice versa. Newnham's unfilial anger at his father, therefore, was the latter's fault for neglecting his own moral priorities by remarriage, and creating disharmony by importing a "stepdame". We have no record of what the "stepdame" in question thought of Newnham, which perhaps is just as well.

Preposterous Newnham's book may be, but it raises questions about remarriage that transcend his grievances. The suggestion that his father was behaving unnaturally when he married articulates the assumption that the bond between children and parents is natural, something to be taken for granted because it's as it should be. The problems with nature as a concept have been a theme of this dissertation, but Newnham implies nothing problematic when he invokes nature as the basis of his claims on his father. He brackets nature with human law, however, ignoring the possibility that they could be in competition as *This Pity she's a Whore* and *The Old Law* showed that they might be, and he brings in reason to back up the combined ruling of nature and human law in condemning his father. His version of the natural order, therefore, admits no qualifications.

Newnham was not a young child, and his tribulations with his father's wife had started twenty years earlier, but the final straw which provoked his outburst was when his stepmother withheld property to which he felt entitled. The rights and wrongs of this particular case aside, remarriage had the potential to affect inheritance. A stepmother might persuade her husband to divert his wealth away from his heirs by a previous marriage in favour of those of his second, a stepfather might run through his predecessor's wealth even if he had no means of altering existing wills. It seems likely that the unsatisfactory older Mr Newnham had died and his widow was postponing an heir's enjoyment of his inheritance because she had a life interest in it:

Like to a stepdame or a dowager

456 Ibid., 2.

Long withering out a young man's revenue.⁴⁵⁷

None of this, of course, applied when there was nothing to leave.⁴⁵⁸

“LIBIDINOUS, SUBTILE, AND DANGEROUS”.

The remarrying widow was the object of sustained invective from different directions. On the one hand was the rhetoric about why it was a bad idea to marry a widow, on the other why a widow should not remarry. Webster's displeasing “character” of an “ordinary widow” is simply a well written version of a widespread defamation, as, for example, this:

If shee be young she is capable of copulation, and the sooner caught in that conjunctive Ceremony; if past her prime, the more libidinous, subtile, and dangerous, having a double wil, the one from her deceased, the other from her widdowhood, by the last of which you may perhaps buy a pigge in a poke; if shee be wealthy, all your comfort is, she is her owne woman, and not subject to the avaricious counsell of peevish parents She hath already tasted of Mandraks, and likes the fruits so well, that shee longs to graft more imps upon that stocke.⁴⁵⁹

The two themes here are that widows have sexual experience and this has left them highly sexed – though why that is a drawback is unclear – and liable to make unfavourable comparisons between their new husbands and their predecessors. Comparisons with one who “dyd more commodiously and gently use her” were what resulted from marrying a widow, the new husband's shortcomings exemplified in an (imagined) complaint by a remarried widow regretting her first husband:

Ah poore husband hee is dead and gone, I shall never forget his kindnesse to mee: hee was the the best conditioned man to mee that lived: hee was so Kinde and loving, that he never came home empty handed to mee, but stil brought me home one knick knacke or other: oh he was

⁴⁵⁷ *MND*, I.i.5.

⁴⁵⁸ Stephen Collins, ‘British Stepfamily Relationships, 1500-1800’, *Journal of Family History* 16, no. 4 (1 January 1991): 331–344; this was written “in another country” when its author was more impressed by Foucault than he subsequently became. Foucault at the time enjoyed great, and, as now seems clear, ludicrous prestige in British social work, the professional context in which this paper was written.

⁴⁵⁹ Francis Lenton, *Characterismi: Or, Lentons Leasures : Expressed in Essayes and Characters, Never before Written On* (London : for Roger Michell, 1631), no pagination.

the sweetest husband that ever lay by a woman: for if ever hee had occasion to breake winde backwards when he was abed, hee would lift up the cloaths, and let it out so sweetly, so sweetly: but thou, thou carest not who heares the report, nor is any whit ashamed of it, thou art a very sloven, and a nasty beast to him, and art not worthy to carry guts to a Beare: ...⁴⁶⁰

A husband who had farted decorously in bed will always be a difficult act to follow.

A highly-sexed widow might pose a threat, though this was probably more to do with male fantasies than reality, but widows had another sexual drawback: they were not usually virgins. When John Milton was accused by an opponent of looking to marry a widow for her money, he huffily replied,

I think with them who both in prudence and elegance of spirit would choose a virgin of mean fortune, honestly bred, before the wealthiest widow.⁴⁶¹

The preference was a common one: as Vives remarked in his advice on choosing a wife:

it seeme no smale thyng to have had the flower of her age, and as Virgil doeth say, to have had the firste love.⁴⁶²

Some men must have shared Milton's view that virginity outweighed other disadvantages, even poverty, which meant that virginity had a commercial value on the marriage market, so Parolles's reference to it as "vendible" is only a cynical version of what may have been a widespread attitude.⁴⁶³ Marlowe's reference to a young woman "whose only dower was her chastity" is making the same point more graciously.⁴⁶⁴

460 John Taylor, *A Iuniper Lecture With the Description of All Sorts of Women, Good, and Bad ...* (London: for William Ley, 1639), 48f; "guts to a bear" eludes explanation but the activity was unmistakably an unpleasant and menial one.

461 Milton, John, "An Apology Against a Pamphlet &c." (1642), in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. French Rowe Fogle et. al. (London: Yale University Press, 1953), Vol. I, 929.

462 Joannes Ludovicus Vives, *The Office and Duetie of an Husband* (London: John Cawood, 1550), sig. Iii.

463 *All's Well*, I,i.151.

464 Christopher Marlowe, "Hero and Leander", (1593), *Complete Poems and Translations*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 28.

The idea that a widow's desirability is compromised by her sexual experience regularly occurs in drama. In Ford's *The Broken Heart*, for example, a woman who has been married against her will tells her real love that he should not wait in the hope that her husband will die, for she would not marry him as

The virgin dowry which my birth bestowed
Is ravished by another. My true love
Abhors to think that Orgilus deserved
No better favours than a second bed.⁴⁶⁵

Jonson's Dame Pliant, however, is also a commodity, her widowhood, like virginity, on sale. In this market, therefore, loss of virginity might be compensated for by money, and, *pace* Milton, a rich widow more desirable than a poor virgin. But not to everyone. Taffata, a widow in Barry's *Ram Alley* of 1607 – 8 is courted by three men, and is about to marry an elderly rich, impotent, knight, but changes her mind at the last minute and goes to bed with his virile son. She had earlier been attracted to a character named Boutcher, and is taken aback when he tells her he won't marry a widow. She believes she knows why:

Belike you think it base and servant-like
To feed upon reversion. You hold us widows,
But as a pie thrust to the lower end
That hath had many fingers in't before,
And is reserved for gross and hungry stomachs.⁴⁶⁶

Boutcher protests that this is not the case, but she continues:

Come, in faith, you do.
And let me tell you that's but ceremony,
For though the pie be broken up before,

465 John Ford, *The Broken Heart*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), II.iii.99.

466 Lording Barry, *Ram Alley* (Nottingham: Nottingham Drama Texts, 1981), ll. 286ff. This is Barry's only surviving play, but if others have been lost it would not be a cause of much regret.

Yet says the proverb, the deeper is the sweeter.
And though a capon's wings and legs be carv'd,
The flesh left with the rump I hope is sweet.⁴⁶⁷

Taffata's cheerful advocacy of sexual experience as promising more fun than virginity follows immediately after she has confronted what Milton hinted at in his reference to "elegance of spirit": that sex polluted a woman.⁴⁶⁸ As the plot resolves itself, Boutcher is urged by his page, actually his lover, Constantia, in disguise, to forget about the widow:

Faith, take a maid, and leave the widow, master:
Of all meats I love not a gaping oyster.⁴⁶⁹

The unmaidenly language leads to further indecencies, until Constantia throws off her disguise, and Boutcher gets not a widow but a virgin.

A CASE STUDY.

The *Character of a Virtuous Widow* was, it seems, little more than a meaningless trope without grounding in reality or theology, and if permanent grief was unappealing as an aspiration, it also went against a widespread recognition that prolonged grief was unhealthy. Jeremy Taylor used the story of the widow of Ephesus to illustrate that grief should not be immoderate, and "Care's an enemy to life" observes Toby Belch in connection with his niece's mourning for her brother, which accords with Lafew's "Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive grief the enemy of the living".⁴⁷⁰ The marriage service in the Prayer Book opens with the assertion that that marriage is a desirable state, and Donne endorsed this by making clear that this extended to second marriages and consigning the low regard for marriage by St Jerome and Tertullian to history:

467 Ibid., ll. 291ff.

468 This metaphor of a pie which has been handled by too many men was quoted directly in a book of characters by Saltonstall, published in 1631: "A Widdow is like a cold Pye thrust downe to the lower end of the Table, that has had too many fingers in't To a younger brother shee's a reversion . . . shee commonly helps to reedifie his ruinous fortunes againe": Wye Saltonstall, *Picturæ Loquentes. Or Pictures Drawn Forth in Characters*. (London: T. Cotes, 1631), no pagination, section 4.

469 Barry, ll. 2235; the lewd associations of oysters and other shellfish are discussed by Williams, Vol. 2, 982f.

470 Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Holy Dying Vol.2 Holy Dying*, ed. P. G. Stanwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 227 – 229; *TN*, I.iii.2; *AW*, I.i.55..

But howsoever it be for that, no such magnifying of Virginitie before, as should diminish the honour and dignity of Mariage, no such magnifying of Continency after, as should frustrate the purpose of Mariage after, or returning to a second Mariage after a true dissolution of the first, can subvert, or contract the Apostles ... Let them mary in the Lord ...⁴⁷¹

Thus it was that in 1627 Donne had the delicate task of preaching at a service of commemoration for his friend Magdalene, Lady Danvers, who had been widowed in 1596 and left with ten children, including the poets Edward and George. She married again in 1609 to a man well over twenty years her junior, and it was a subject for comment that the bride

was old enough to have been Sir John's mother, but he married her for love of her wit. The Earl of Danby [the husband's older brother] was displeased with him for this disagreeable match.⁴⁷²

Whatever the family's embarrassment, Donne grasped the nettle, and in a rather laboured compliment to the deceased observed that her second husband could have had any woman he wanted but chose her:

his birth, and youth, and interest in great favours in Court; and legall proximity to great possessions in the world, might justly have promist him acceptance, in what family soever, or upon what person soever, hee had directed and plac't his Affections.

Adding the couple's ages together made, according to Donne, sixty, so their average age was thirty which meant that they were much of an age,

for, as twins of one houre, they liv'd.⁴⁷³

471 John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne. Edited, with Introductions and Critical Apparatus, by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson*, ed. George Reuben Potter and afterwards Simpson Spearing (Berkeley ; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), VIII, 103; Tertullian was a second and third century theologian who seems to have distanced himself from early Christianity, and was not canonised. His disapproval of second marriages was apparently more rigorous than any subsequent Catholic orthodoxy. Donne's reference to him is therefore a bit surprising. My information, such as it is, comes from Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm : A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 46ff.

472 John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 173.

473 Donne's Sermons, VIII, 88. It was preached at Chelsea on 1st July 1627.

(This conceit was a bit disingenuous, for the couple's combined age was nearer seventy than sixty). The marriage had been a happy one:

shee had a cheerfulness, agreeable to his youth, and he a sober staidnesse, conformable to her more yeres.

Their mother's remarriage was certainly beneficial to her sons, for Danvers became close to George who he helped in many ways at the start of his career.⁴⁷⁴ We have no idea about what Donne thought of the widower, but it's possible to detect his awareness that remarriage as such, and marriage to a much younger man, both had connotations which were intrinsically absurd and needed confronting.⁴⁷⁵

Magdalene Herbert was not unusual in remarrying, only in the age of her husband, though there is some evidence of a tendency for widows to marry rather younger men.⁴⁷⁶ It would be misleading to infer from the clamour of opposition to remarriage that the practice was always condemned. Donne, as we have seen, publicly defended it, and there are references in works of piety to the desirability of dying husbands to counsel their wives on choosing their successors.⁴⁷⁷ When the wife of Oliver Heywood (1629 – 1702) was dying, she not only described the sort of woman he should look for to replace her but suggested names of people who might fit the bill.⁴⁷⁸ And Newnham's objection to a father remarrying was not shared by Simonds D'Ewes who took a lot of trouble fixing his father up with a widow, though the romance is tempered by his determination that any stepmother should be past child-bearing.⁴⁷⁹

474 Drury, John, *Music at Midnight : The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 70ff.

475 Magdalene Danvers's widower went on to marry twice more, and to sign the death warrant for Charles I, so despite his helpfulness to George Herbert this makes him a suspect figure to the poet's admirers who are often tribal Anglicans; DNB.

476 Brodsky, op. cit.

477 Thomas Becon, *The Sicke Mans Salve* (London: printed for the assignes of Richard Daie, 1591), 203ff

478 Oliver Heywood, *The Rev. Oliver Heywood, B.A., 1630-1702: His Autobiography, Diaries, Anecdote and Event Book*, ed. J. Horsfall Turner (Brighouse: A. B. Bayes, 1881), Vol. 1, 65; I have been unable to establish his wife's dates.

479 Simonds D'Ewes, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1845), Vol. 1, 227ff; the concerns about her age are recorded in Simonds D'Ewes, *The Diary of Sir Simonds D'Ewes (1622-1624) : Journal D'un Étudiant Londonien Sous La Règne de Jacques Ier : Texte*, ed. Elisabeth Bourcier (Paris: Didier, 1974), 125.

CHAPMAN.

Two plays by Chapman provide comment on remarriage and are related to this confused background of misogyny cut across by daily experience. *The Widow's Tears* is usually classed as a comedy, albeit a mirthless one.⁴⁸⁰ At first sight it appears unrelentingly cynical, in the words of Swinburne “poor in amiable sentiment”, but closer acquaintance reveals a serious and thoughtful exploration of ethical questions, specifically those relating to remarriage.⁴⁸¹ The bare plot line gives little indication of this seriousness. A widow has sworn never to remarry then quickly changes her mind. A wife swears never to remarry, so to test her steadfastness her husband tricks her into believing he is dead. She is at first grief-stricken, but soon yields to a man she believes to be a soldier, but is actually her husband in disguise. To retrieve the situation she pretends she knew who he was all along, at which point the play fizzles out just when Chapman has set up a fine dramatic impasse which he apparently fails to resolve. What he has done, however, is call into question the vows made by the women in the first place, and to ask whether they were desirable, sensible, or practicable. The play challenges the misogynist caricature of widows as so in thrall to sexual desire that it overwhelms their best intentions, and it also asks how good these intentions were in the first place. Many people in early modern audiences will have remarried or knew that there was a good chance that they would in the future, and those without direct experience were certainly acquainted with lots of other people who had. Chapman was therefore writing for an audience with an unusually high level of involvement with his themes, and well placed to gauge the emotional and intellectual truthfulness of the play.

The Widow's Tears has an unusual structure in that one of its two plots is completed before the second gets under way rather than running in parallel with it. In the first part of the play, Tharsalio is successful in his pursuit of Eudora, a rich widow, and goes on in effect to control the action of the second plot. He is an example of the stock dramatic character of the Machiavel, though his anarchic energy makes him an outstanding one. As one character says of him,

I marvel what man, what woman, what name, what action, doth his tongue glide over, but it leaves a slime upon't. (IV.i.141)

480 George Chapman, *The Widow's Tears*, ed. Akihiro Yamada (London: Methuen, 1975). References are to this edition.

The play is from the first decade of the seventeenth century, though the exact date is uncertain.

481 Quoted Yamada, xxvii.

He has a colourful past, and it's no coincidence that his name shares syllables with Arsace, a bawd, which suggests how we are meant to respond to him. He comments without illusion on the questions raised in the play. Widows are in his view incapable of remaining celibate, but this is not in the least deplorable because celibacy would be a denial of life; so when he hears of his sister-in-law's vow never to remarry if she were widowed, he is incredulous that she would

not endure the touch of flesh, during the wretched Lent of your miserable life. (I.i.94)

It is noteworthy that he gives no hint that there might be reasons for marrying other than sex. He wagers with his brother Lysander that she will not keep her oath:

And to say truth, brother, what shame is due to't? Or what congruence doth it carry, that a young lady, gallant, vigorous, full of spirit and complexion, her appetite new-whetted with nuptial delights, to be confined to the speculation of a death's head, or for the loss of a husband, the world affording flesh enough, make the noontide of her years the sunset of her pleasures? (III.i.162)

This shares some of the language and concepts of the routine denigration of remarrying widows, but the tone is different. There is generosity here, a tough questioning of the idea that widows should devote their lives to remembering and honouring their late husbands, as Webster pretends to have thought they should.

Tharsalio is open about his motives. He is a younger brother, with the penury that goes with it, but he's also concerned to improve the fortunes of his whole family:

Alas, brother, our house is decayed, and my honest ambition to restore it, I hope, is pardonable. (III.i.149)

Eudora had at first contemptuously rejected Tharsalio's suit but when she learns how virile he is she soon changes her mind. The information is provided by the bawd Arsace, one of her tenants, who pretends to commiserate with her for what's in store for her if the rumour that she is to marry Tharsalio is true:

If your honour does, you are utterly undone, for he's the most incontinent and insatiate man of women that ever Venus blessed with ability to please them. (II.ii.75)

Arsace goes on to tell of his “unreasonable manhood”, and clinches things with the news that he has on occasions satisfied nine women in one night. This causes Eudora to take notice: “Manhood, quoth you?”, she says, and promptly sinks into a love melancholy, and the next thing we hear is that she is to be married.

When she is in this pre-nuptial melancholy, we learn from her maids how much she has formerly detested remarriage. Eudora had sealed in her late husband's heart

such imprecations to her bed if ever it should receive a second impression; to her open and often detestations of that incestuous life (as she termed it) of widows' remarriages, as being but a kind of lawful adultery, like usury permitted by the law, not approved; that to wed a second was no better than to cuckold the first ...⁴⁸² (II.iv.24)

But a man who can satisfy nine women in a night is too good to pass up, and these platitudes about widowhood are quickly forgotten. Tharsalio is himself in part a character from stock comedy, the gold-digging younger brother, and when Eudora, whose name implies gold, abandons her vow of celibacy and marries him, the play's first plot is complete without achieving much except some easy laughs, though important questions about the merits of remaining single after a bereavement have been raised. The essential seriousness comes out only with the second sub-plot, and in the relationship of the two stories to one another. Superficially, the second plot is just another version of the first, a widow overwhelmed by lust and forgetting her commitment to permanent mourning. It's a version of the story of the widow of Ephesus told by Petronius.⁴⁸³ Hysterical with grief at her loss, the widow, together with a maid, took up residence in her husband's tomb where she refused to eat or drink, until persuaded to do so by a soldier with whom she quickly became sexually involved. The soldier's job was to guard the bodies of crucified men near the tomb, but he was so engrossed with the widow that he neglected his duties

482 The phrase “a kind of lawful adultery” occurs also in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

483 Petronius Arbiter, *Petronius, the Satyricon, and Seneca, the Apocolocyntosis*, trans. John Patrick Sullivan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 120 - 122.

and one of the bodies was removed by its family. To allow this to happen was a capital offence, so to protect her new lover the widow arranged for her husband's corpse to be fixed on the empty cross in place of the missing one. Comparable stories are to be found in many cultures, and as Petronius tells it, it is clearly meant to be funny, so most of the audience laugh, though one man is so indignant that he thinks the widow should be crucified to supply the missing body.⁴⁸⁴ The two responses to the widow's behaviour set something of an agenda: or to rephrase the implicit question, which bit of the widow's behaviour is questionable? Is it her vow of celibacy? Or breaking it?

Chapman closely follows Petronius's version of the story with one crucial difference. In *The Widow's Tears*, the soldier who consoles the grieving woman is her husband. This changes the moral balance and disables what comedy there is in the story. Chapman's "widow" is in a state of extreme, nearly fatal, grief as a result of a hoax. Her husband comes to her when she's in this condition, but instead of relieving it by letting her know he is alive, he adds to it the cruellest deception of seducing her in the guise of a soldier. The result is ethical turmoil. In the Eudora story, humour was extracted from her sexual needs overwhelming her stated intentions, with an implicit querying of how sensible these intentions were. Cynthia had expressed outrage at Eudora's change of heart, and when she in her turn is widowed, or thinks she is, she becomes hysterical with grief. This is short lived, and soon she is finding consolation with a soldier, another widow conforms to type, undisciplined desire making her forget her late husband in an exact parallel with the behaviour of Eudora in the first plot. The soldier, though, is her husband, but does she know that the man she makes love with is her husband?

Leaving this question open is an astonishing piece of theatre which challenges the comic simplicity of the first plot and raises a bewildering number of issues about the second. Characters in disguise, and shedding their disguises at the last moment, were a standard feature of plays of the period, but almost invariably the audience is aware of who is the "real" character behind the disguise. Kent and Edgar both identify themselves to the audience in *King Lear*, and we know who Cesare in *Twelfth Night* "really" is; since the plots in both cases wouldn't work if audiences as well as characters in the plays doesn't know who is who. In *The Widow's Tears*, however, Lysander does not explain himself to the audience. The stage direction in the *printed* text reads:

484 Ure, Peter, 'The Widow of Ephesus: Some Reflections on an International Comic Theme', *Durham University Journal* 49 (1956): 1–9.

Enter Lysander, like a soldier disguised at all parts; a half-pike, gorget, etc. . . . He discovers the tomb, looks in, and wonders, etc. (IV.ii.s.d.)

It is likely that Chapman oversaw the publication of the play. The dedicatory epistle to the 1612 quarto says

This poor comedy (of many desired to see printed) I thought not utterly unworthy that affectionate design in me⁴⁸⁵

The stage directions are therefore to be read as part of the text, not as insertions by a later editor, so “at all parts” makes the disguise a thorough one, and Lysander's wonder – presumably a theatrical gesture - adds to its completeness. The playwright, therefore, probably intended that the audience should not identify the soldier. A gorget was a protection for the throat which became a decorative chestplate as armour ceased to be military protection and increasingly ornamental. It seems not to have been face covering, and may not in itself complete Lysander's disguise, but in the speech immediately following this entry he gives no hint that one of the women in the tomb is his wife. The audience, moreover, has no reason to expect Lysander's appearance, since he has wagered on his wife's “chastity” and has an interest in not jeopardising it, and anybody in the audience familiar with the story of the widow of Ephesus will have expected a soldier, and been the less likely to identify Lysander. He enters the tomb, but his wife is unresponsive, and on leaving he makes a speech in praise of woman's constancy, still without identifying himself. On his next visit he finds the women have consumed the food and drink he left them, and events move quickly. By the end of the visit Cynthia is in love, her resistance at an end. This provokes an angry soliloquy from Lysander on women, and the first hint of the real situation when he refers to the “believed” body of the husband. (V.ii.37) An alert member of the audience might spot the significance of this “believed”, but Lysander maintains the role, contemptuous that “this vot'ress of widow-constancy” should

give the utmost earnest of her love to an eightpenny sentinel; in effect, to prostitute herself upon her husband's coffin! (V.ii.40)

485 Yamada edition, 4.

The next scene has the stage direction:

Tomb opens, and Lysander within lies along, Cynthia and Ero. (V.iii.s.d.)

As they are presumably in post-coital languor, the presence of Ero, Cynthia's maid, is puzzling: perhaps she was an interested spectator. This is the scene in which the widow proposes mounting her husband's body on "the vacant gibbet", observing

What hurt is't, being dead, to save the living? (V.iii.21)

On leaving the tomb, Lysander finally reveals himself to the audience:

off with this antic, [*throwing off his armour*] the shirt that Hercules wore for his wife was not more baneful. (V.iii.61)

His brother comes upon him in his own guise, but even then takes some time to work out that the soldier and Lysander are one and the same, since his brother's presence at the tomb was unexpected:

What should be the riddle of this, that he is stolen hither in a soldier's disguise? He should have stayed at Dipolis to receive news from us. (V.iii.120)

Lysander keeps up the pretence to his wife, though now he utters savage asides to the audience, until his wife has the situation explained to her by her brother-in-law.

If the audience is unaware that the soldier is Cynthia's husband, then these scenes are just a joyless repetition of the traditional story of the widow of Ephesus, a rerun of the susceptible Eudora's quickly giving up on celibacy. The soldier is someone taking a kindly interest in a distressed widow, for which he is rewarded sexually and puts his life in danger in the process. Such an interpretation is impossible if the audience knows who the soldier is. When he finally reveals himself, however, the cruelty to which Cynthia has been subjected becomes shockingly

apparent. A woman in love yields to a man who has sadistically deceived her and who looks to the audience to endorse his vilification of women. We are invited to judge between an abused woman and her abuser, a choice which forces a reassessment of the derision accorded Eudora in the first part of the play.

The behaviour of the male characters reframes the two questions about women promising not to remarry. Throughout the play the issue has been mainly whether they are able to be celibate, but there's also been an implicit questioning about why they should. An inability to control themselves is apparently demonstrated by the behaviour of the two widows in the play, but the pointlessness of a widow's devoting her remaining years to the memory of her late husband is brought out with bleak irony by the disguised Lysander's argument to his wife:

Suppose that in this tomb
For your dear spouse you should entomb yourself
A living corpse ... ,
... can your dear spouse
Take notice of your faith and constancy?
Shall your dear spouse revive to give you thanks?
...
Enjoy the fruits of life. (IV.ii.80)

If a widow's constancy cannot benefit her late husband, it can have little purpose, and Cynthia turns the argument back on the soldier when he is becoming squeamish about replacing the missing body of the crucified man by her supposed husband's.

At the point at which the audience realise that the soldier is Lysander, everything changes. The widow ceases to be a grotesque figure of fun, and the moral questions about remarriage become recast. If the recognition comes only when Lysander throws off his disguise, the moment is a highly dramatic one, and the knowing smiles at an inconstant widow will quickly fade. No doubt some members of Jacobean audiences will have seen through the disguise almost immediately, but the stage direction and the circumstances of the plot seem designed to put off the realisation until Lysander reveals himself. The dramatic tension would be increased if people *suspected* who

the soldier was, but without being sure. Perhaps Lysander was played by an actor who was so distinctive that his voice would have been immediately recognised, though it was common for actors to play more than one part, so realising that the soldier was played by the same actor would not necessarily mean that impersonation was intended. The play was in any case popular, performed by boys' companies, so several actors may have played Lysander over the years of its run.

The Widow's Tears, then, works in two ways. Seeing it for the first time the identity of the soldier might not be obvious, but seeing it again would raise issues about this marriage and its moral basis. By the time it appeared in print the play had been in existence, and according to the title page, “often presented in the blacke and white Friers”, for six or seven years (the best guess of its date is May or June, 1605).⁴⁸⁶ In print the reader is aware of how different were the cases of Eudora and of Cynthia, but someone seeing the play for the first time would not realise this until the “soldier” reveals himself.

When Tharsalio recognises who the soldier is, he tells his sister-in-law, who is able to retrieve the situation, after a fashion, by telling her husband that she knew who he was all along: she is the

Ill-destined wife of a transformed monster,
Who to assure himself of what he knew,
Hath lost the shape of man.
Poor soldier's case! Do not we know you, sir?
But I have given thee what thou camest to seek.
Go, satyre, run affrighted with the noise
Of that harsh-sounding horn thyself hast blown.
Farewell; I leave thee with my husband's corpse,
Make much of that. (V.v.81)

Ero, the maid, knows the truth; so does Tharsalio; so, now, does the audience. But by this stage Cynthia is not a comic widow, oversexed and brazen, but a tragic figure undone by men with a

486 Yamada ed., xxxiii.

contempt for women and by the generosity of her own nature, until she is forced to dissemble and behave like the harridan that Renaissance comic women often were expected to be.

And there Chapman left it. He provided a perfunctory happy ending with the marriage of Eudora's daughter and Cynthia's son, and sorted out the Lysander/Cynthia marriage with an entirely unconvincing piece of stage business. Following the stage direction "Eudora whispers with Cynthia", Tharsalio's speech ends the play on an ironic note:

Come, brother, thank the Countess; she hath sweat
To make your peace. Sister, give me your hand.
So; brother, let your lips compound the strife,
And think you have the only constant wife. (V.v.315)

But between this rounding off and the dénouement of the scenes in the tomb occurs an episode with apparently only a tenuous connection with the main plot. In it a new character is introduced, a comic jack-in-office of a Governor, explicitly identified with the Vice of morality plays:

Nay, the Vice must snap his Authority at all he meets; how shall't else know what part he plays? (V.v.128)

The satire in this episode is crude, and only one remark of the Governor bears directly on the theme of the play: when setting out his proposals for reforming the city, he announces,

I'll have all the young widows spaded for marrying again. (V.v.257)

Destroying a woman's fertility would not have been a laughing matter in early modern England, and the preposition "for" is ambiguous, possibly meaning that the widows are to be spayed so that they can remarry, in which case the main purpose of marriage would be frustrated. "For" could, on the other hand mean that young widows were to be punished because they already have remarried. Either interpretation provides an added twist to the arguments about remarriage with which the play has been concerned, and it's appropriate that the complexity of the subject should

get this extra dimension in the last scene.

The ending of *The Widow's Tears* is not the artistic and intellectual failure it has sometimes been seen to be. Chapman had constructed a dramatic and moral dilemma that has no solution, so a tidy resolution of the plot would have been in bad faith.⁴⁸⁷ The satire on the Governor is about justice and arbitrary power, and the hint that he is an absurd character from a morality play, invite the recognition that *The Widow's Tears* is not a play of strident ethical propaganda, but one of subtle argument about difficult human issues familiar to early modern audiences. This is not to deny the broad humour of much of the language and action, but it's also a play about ideas, and deals seriously with issues of great moral importance.

THE HAMLET PARALLEL.

The Widow's Tears provides a dramatic reconciliation between the contemptuous rhetoric about widows and the empirical reality that there was nothing unusual or reprehensible about remarriage. It turns the ridicule back on itself, mockery of the stereotypical widow made to seem comic by the very absurdity of its premiss. An altogether more schematic version of the same critique is the Player Queen's rejection of remarriage in *Hamlet*. The play within a play consists of about sixty lines, well over half of them on the subject of remarriage. The Player Queen and King have been married for thirty years – Hamlet's age, according to the gravedigger, who is perhaps a bit muddled – but the King knows himself to be dying, and hopes his widow will find another husband who loves her as much as he does. Her reply is forthright:

O confound the rest.

Such love must needs be treason in my breast.

In second husband let me be accurst;

None wed the second but who kill'd the first. (III.ii.168)

These lines, particularly the word “but” have caused editors problems, though the general sense is clear enough: that the Player Queen is opposed to the remarriage of widows, and intends to stay

⁴⁸⁷ A number of Arthur Miller's plays similarly create insoluble dilemmas, so the plays' endings – *Death of a Salesman*, *A View from the Bridge*, *All my Sons* – may seem anticlimatic. They are better seen as a recognition, shared by Chapman, that some moral questions can be only partly answered.

single. Whatever the intricacies of meanings detectable in the line, what is important is the hyperbole. The extravagance of the sentiment draws attention to the extremity of the position the Player Queen is taking, and to its inherent misguidedness. She continues:

The instances that second marriage move
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.
A second time I kill my husband dead,
When second husband kisses me in bed. (III.ii.173)

So far her objection to remarriage has been expressed through metaphor - treason - and epigram, with only one actual reason for the objection, that remarriage is invariably mercenary (though she doesn't say what's wrong with that: lots of marriages were, and are).

The Player King then delivers a long speech, the gist of which is that no doubt his wife's intentions at the present are sincere, but that circumstances change and so may her attitude to remarriage:

This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change, ...
So think thou wilt no second husband wed,
But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead. (III.ii.105)

But “the lady doth protest too much” as she continues her vehement insistence that she will never remarry. The first plot of *The Widow's Tears* sets pragmatism and strident avowals against one another, perhaps intentionally recalling the debate in *Hamlet*. The result is in part mockery of human frailty, in part sympathy with the avowals, in part questioning their wisdom, and all these are carried over from *The Mousetrap*, as the play within the play is called. The Prince commissions it to flush out his uncle's guilt, but the dumb show does this, and the dialogue between Player Queen and King has no bearing on the murder. If its purpose is to reproach Gertrude, which Hamlet's behaviour suggest it is, it associates him with the misogynist platitudes about widows. Insofar as these platitudes were recognised for what they were by an audience well

stocked with remarried people, the moral balance between mother and son becomes even more complicated than it already is. At one level she is a representative example of the randy widow of caricature, with the added joke that she's married to a drunk, so there is an element of the comic stemming from the stereotype. On the other hand she has done no more than what many widows did, to make good the loss of bereavement, not, as her son implies, in a frenzy of desire but to satisfy a common human need for companionship, which the English Church identified as one of the purposes of marriage.

“ODIUM NOVERCALE”.

To a modern mind, the real moral question in remarriage is not its appropriateness but how it affects children. The sinister stepmother is a familiar figure in legend and proverb, but she has no male counterpart. Equally widows have their associations, but stepfathers do not. The stepmother image seems to owe much to the fear that a stepmother will cause her predecessor's children to be disinherited in favour of her own. Newnham thought that his father should have foreseen this danger before remarrying. Whether such a materialist theory fully explains the bad reputation of stepmothers is unlikely, but it doesn't altogether account for why this bad reputation doesn't apply to stepfathers. Nor does it explain why widowers do not attract the derision aimed at widows.

Panek's work is relevant here. She has located twenty-three comedies in which remarried widows feature (her search did not extend to tragedy), nearly half of them by Middleton or generally attributed to him. Panek argues that the comic widow is a means of handling the anxiety induced by independent women in a patriarchal society. In control of their own resources, sexually experienced, and not under male control, they are threatening figures who can be cut down to size by depicting them as foolish or pitiable. This is their function in comedy, but the argument could be extended to tragedy, notably *The Duchess of Malfi* in which the widow marries her steward and overturns the social world in the process.

The argument illustrates the notorious difficulty of writing about comedy. Trying to explain why something is funny has a habit of killing the humour. Aristotle's book on comedy may have been lost, but it's more likely that he was too sensible to have written it. Panek's discussion of

Middleton's comedies are part of a larger attempt to integrate empirical data, ideology, and drama as they deal with widowhood. The result is a thoughtful study which seems to me to take the whole thing too seriously by finding profound social anxieties giving urgency to the handful of comedies in which widows feature. Many of the widows in early modern plays are actually of no great dramatic significance: they occur in Jonson's *The Case is Altered* and *Bartholomew Fair*, for instance, but are of little importance to the plots. Their prominence in Middleton's plays is of interest, however, and Panek seeks to explain it as stemming from the playwright's personal experience. His father died in 1586, leaving some land, a wharf, and a tenement. Ten months later his widow married Thomas Harvey. "poore and unable to paye his Creditors". The outcome was disruption and litigation, which has led Panek to her conclusion, shared by other commentators, that there's biographical element in Middleton's interest in widows.⁴⁸⁸ Not everyone has agreed:

The critic would be justified in branding such biographical reconstruction as suppositious and irrelevant ...⁴⁸⁹

Panek also allows that Middleton's frequent use of widows in his plays might simply be a reflection of "his professional assessment of audience tastes".⁴⁹⁰ The two suggestions do not exclude one another, and both may have contributed. A third possibility, not discussed by Panek, is that Middleton had available to him a particular actor associated with playing widows whose popularity contributed to this assessment of what audiences liked.

The assumption that humour is always significant and that it is susceptible to being decoded is a legacy of Freud. It achieved apotheosis in the work of Legman who offered a different analysis of the comic widow. In patriarchal societies men expect to marry virgins, which extends their ownership of the woman's body back to her birth, and continues it forward in prohibitions of remarriage which in its extreme form included requiring a widow to kill herself.⁴⁹¹ The humour of this eluded Legman. But the idea that anything that makes people laugh has some cathartic basis

488 John B. Brooks, 'Middleton's Stepfather and the Captain of "The Phoenix"', *Notes and Queries* 8, no. 10 (1 October 1961): 382–84; Mildred G. Christian, 'A Sidelight on the Family History of Thomas Middleton', *Studies in Philology* 44, no. 3 (1947): 490–96.

489 David L. Frost, *The School of Shakespeare: The Influence of Shakespeare on English Drama, 1600-42* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 36.

490 Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157.

491 G. (Gershon) Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (London: Cape, 1969), 647; Legman's industry was heroic and his seriousness is endearing, but one is left wondering if he had much of a sense of humour.

is questionable: I live with cats who make me laugh, but I'm not aware of any profound anxiety being purged when I do so.⁴⁹² This is not to say that humour is always frivolous, only that it may be, so the stage widow is readily explained as just one of a number of standard comic figures, such as the braggart, with whom the humour is one of recognition like a comedian's catchphrase. There was entertainment to be extracted from remarriage, and from widows in particular, just as there was from national stereotypes such as Fluellen and Macmorris. Many representations of widows in early modern drama are tiresome exploitations of a cliché, therefore, but Chapman at least offered a version of the joke that draws on empirical experience to challenge a stereotype even as it uses it.

492 Though I suppose I wouldn't.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

ENVOI.

Reviewing the first night of *Waiting for Godot*, Kenneth Tynan observed:

A play ... is basically a means of spending two hours in the dark without being bored.⁴⁹³

The plays I have been discussing started life with such a function, but boredom can also be warded off by watching dogs being set on to attack a tethered bear, with the difference that whatever urges such brutality allays, it will have had no intellectual or spiritual content.⁴⁹⁴ There is, therefore, a grim symmetry in the fact that when the playhouses were closed in 1642 the bears were shot, as the denial of human need for art was accompanied by a refusal to accept its atavistic obverse. The plays discussed in this study all accept that families can both nurture and deprive, just as the people in them are potentially at once creative and destructive. Mediating between these possibilities are members of the family acting as moral agents, keeping their tempers, unlike Lear, doing what they're told, unlike Juliet, thinking of others, like the Fool. Always at the back of such mediation is the question of why people were supposed to behave as they should, where morality came from. Domestic life was subject to little external regulation in early modern England. Parental harshness and neglect was no doubt mitigated by pressure from neighbours and the wider community, but there was no legislation to cover it.

There was minimal guidance from official sources, notably the Commandments, but few realistic sanctions for breaking them as Lancelot Gobbo did with apparent impunity. Families, in short, were self-regulating, places where individualism had to be negotiated with other people, and when this negotiation failed tragedy could ensue. If there was not much in the way of external coercion, there existed nevertheless powerful ideological pressures that defined the moral basis of family life, laying down traditional expectations about behaviour, so in a

493 Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, ed. Dominic Shellard (London: Nick Hern, 2008), 69; the review was first published in *The Observer* of 7.viii.1955.

494 Tynan was an enthusiast for bullfighting in which he detected an aesthetic interest of a high order, as had Hemingway. Bullfighting undoubtedly has ceremonious aspects, though whether these amount to any more than ritual slaughter is open to question, but there cannot have been anything ceremonious about setting a pack of dogs on a tethered bear. That the bears came off best – they were too valuable to allow the dogs to “win” - merely inverts the brutality, and it's not easy to see any distinction between bear “baiting” and encouraging dogs to tear a fox to pieces which is still done in modern Britain.

patriarchal society hierarchy was self-evident and self-explanatory. Up to a point all this was endorsed by scripture, but as an explanatory concept it is ultimately unsatisfactory because its legitimacy is doubtful and its efficiency as a template manifestly ineffective. The Wife of Bath had demonstrated this in the fourteenth century, describing how she ran rings round her husbands, and in none of the plays I have discussed did patriarchy count for much.

In a number of these plays, though, I detected another organising concept, that of nature, like patriarchy a fusion of the descriptive and the normative, of how the world is and how it should be. Nature remains thoroughly elusive but its ubiquitous reference in these plays demonstrate that it was understood even when it was inexplicable. Its organic associations enriched nature as a source of morality, so that it could provide a critique for the most intimate of behaviours like breastfeeding, but it might also account for what was wrong, like Regan's ingratitude.

There are obvious epistemological problems with nature, notably its capacity to explain opposite forms of behaviour, like Cleanthes's loyalty to his father and Regan's disloyalty to hers. There are also the familiar problems of power in deciding what nature actually consists of. Lear calling his daughters "unnatural" assumed a control over definition which was rapidly slipping away from him, and he was soon to be forced to ask what was natural from a Bedlam beggar. Nevertheless, apart from *King Lear*, none of these plays and the writings associated with them implies that nature is at all problematic, nor that audiences needed any instruction to understand what was meant by it. That it was unnatural to offer to fix up your widowed mother with a young lover needed no exposition, and that nature could be invoked to endorse incest might be morally shaky but made intellectual sense.

If this study can make any claim to adding to knowledge it as a footnote, albeit an unconscionably long one, to the work of Danby and Elton in suggesting a modification to how they understood nature and its relationship to morality. Danby perceived two competing views of nature, roughly those of Edmund and Edgar, sociability against individualism. Elton detected two versions of God, one an absentee indifferent to how people were faring in His creation, the other an omniscient presence endlessly involving Himself in the life of His people. A society that learned its theology from *The Book of Common Prayer* would not recognise the absent deity, though trained theologians might, but their God was an altogether more amiable being than Elton allowed. His presence in the natural world could be negotiated by prayer: for rain or fair weather

as circumstances required, and sooner or later the weather would improve. Edmund's amoral self-serving was not in a binary relationship with any alternative, but in a continuum of human sinfulness. God had set out His wishes in nature, providing at once a prompt and a yardstick, the ought and the is that has been several times referred to. It was not natural to behave badly, but to be unnatural, to suspend or go against an essentially benign divine order that gave women breasts to feed their children, and expected them to use them, encouraged adults to care for their elderly parents, and provided storks as an example.

APPENDIX 1.

SIBLINGS IN CONTEXT.

At the start of Chapter 5 I noted how little evidence was available to gauge whether brothers and sisters in early modern England were commonly at one another's throats as they seem almost invariable to be in plays of the period. Stone argued that relationships between brothers were usually soured by primogeniture, but that those between sisters and their brothers were “often the closest in the family”. This was certainly not the case in Dorothy Osborne's family which I discussed later in the same chapter, but her letters are unique and not evidence of any general trend. They do, however, indicate a way in which letters and diaries can give access to qualitative information which is not evidence of a general trend, but can suggest features of the experience of particular families which might apply to other families.

Most of the family relationships in the plays I have been discussing are represented in highly emotional interactions ranging from incest to murder, but the default situation in renaissance plays is quarrelling siblings at one another's throats, and historians have made little headway in deciding whether this is a theatrical convention with little connection with empirical reality, or a general picture of a world familiar to theatre audiences. There is, of course, virtually no evidence available with which to address these questions. The fullest attempt at putting together a sociology of sibling relationships is by Crawford, who searched the records for examples of what she saw as a fundamentally important and co-operative feature of social life.⁴⁹⁵ She points out that the incidence of parental death and remarriage in the period created a diversity of forms of siblinghood, including half-siblings, step-siblings as well as “full” siblings who shared the same biological parents. But that is obvious enough, and there's no need to go to the archives to work out that such a diversity existed, and exists, and identifying it is therefore essentially descriptive and sheds no light on the quality of relationships. Crawford, moreover, was working backwards to find evidence that things were as they theoretically should have been, not inductively from patterns of evidence which do not anyway exist, so she found traces of co-operation, but not of a lack of it, for which she was not looking.

⁴⁹⁵ Patricia M. Crawford, *Bodies, Blood and Families in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Longman, 2004).

Another attempt to use archival evidence was by Froide, writing about unmarried women. She noted the difficulties in assessing emotional intimacy in the absence of personal writing, but nevertheless asserted that

the most meaningful ties were with their also single sisters.⁴⁹⁶

Circumstantial support for this comes from her analysis of the wills of “singlewomen”, that is unmarried women, between 1550 and 1730, in which she found that the largest group of beneficiaries were sisters. The numerical difference between sisters and brothers, and between sisters and other relations, male and female, was not large, however, and the largest category was combined male and female affinity and kindred whose exact relationship with the testator is unrecorded⁴⁹⁷. Her conclusion about the greater intimacy between unmarried sisters, compared with other relations, therefore, is tentative, and her evidence doesn't shed any light on Stone's view about the importance of dealings between brothers and sisters, and she seems to have overlooked the obvious point that a woman who had no children and wished to keep her wealth within the family had only her siblings and their children to choose from. The small difference between brothers and sisters as beneficiaries could be in part accounted for not by greater intimacy but by there being more surviving sisters because women live longer than men.⁴⁹⁸

The rest of this appendix is an analysis of sibling relationships of which we have some knowledge from letters and a diary with a view to bringing out types of family relationships that might have a wider applicability than the individual cases discussed here.

PRECEPT AND PRACTICE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY YORKSHIRE.

The extensive didactic literature on families has very little about brothers and sisters, but one major exception has intriguing connotations. This was a book of advice to his son written by Christopher Wandesford (1592 – 1640), some time in the early seventeenth century, though not published until the eighteenth. It's mostly conventional advice, but the author describes how he had cared for his own siblings, making a good marriage for one sister and providing a portion for another, supporting a brother at an inn of court and another at the university, and setting up a third

496 Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

497 *Ibid.*, 46 – 49.

498 *Ibid.*, 74ff.

in trade.⁴⁹⁹ He urges his son to follow this example and treat his younger siblings with care and affection and to advise and protect them when he became in place of a father to them.⁵⁰⁰ The oldest brother was not to resent the financial provision made for these younger ones by their father, and was required by filial obedience to help them out if they were short of money, a generosity also to be extended to uncles and other kin to whom “nature binds you to observe”.⁵⁰¹ Wandesford goes on to make clear that he expects his widow to be obeyed by their son all his life, not just when he was young.⁵⁰² The oldest son, to whom the book is addressed, was not to “demean and neglect” his brothers and sisters, “but respect them as pieces hewn out of the same rock”, treating them well so that “habits of love and affection will grow” and cement the stones of the building.⁵⁰³

This was not what happened, and the interest of this book is that we know something of the life of the son for whom it was written, though he almost certainly never read it. The times were unsettled, and much of the Wandesford's family wealth seems to have been tied up in Ireland, made inaccessible by unrest there, and also, probably, by legal difficulties, so it may not have been easy for his sons to follow his example, even were they minded to.⁵⁰⁴ The portion of the wealth available to widow and children was to become the subject of discord which we know about because Wandesford's troubled daughter Alice wrote copious autobiographical sketches.⁵⁰⁵ She was an aggrieved and superstitious woman whose frequent misfortunes and illnesses were invariably sorted out by divine intervention, though this did little to improve her mood. Her father's death in Ireland left his affairs in some disorder, made worse by political events, but his heir was dutifully responsible in his treatment of the rest of the family and Alice Wandesford refers to him as a “deare and loving brother; nay, I may say, a father to us all”.⁵⁰⁶ This brother, however, fell foul of the parliamentary authorities, having been suspected of fighting for the king,

499 Christopher Wandesford, *A Book of Instructions, Written by ... Sir Christr. Wandesforde, Knt. to His Son George ... in Order to the Regulating the Conduct of His Whole Life* [Ed. by T. Comber]. (Cambridge, 1777), 90.

500 Ibid., 7.

501 Ibid., 84 – 5, 88.

502 Ibid., 3

503 Ibid., 7.

504 There is a curious twist to the fate of the manuscript and its eventual publication. On the recto of the title page of the copy in York Minster library is pasted a printed “anecdote” giving the book's provenance. Long after Wandesford's death Roger Dodworth, a noted antiquarian, observed that he had in his library a ms which had been copied by a relative who had once lived in Ireland. He didn't know the author, but the ms was authenticated by Lady Wandesford and Madam T. (sic). The preface identifies the editor as Thomas Comber, descendent of the author: a Comber had been the subject of scandal involving Alice Thornton and subsequently married her daughter.

505 Alice Thornton, *The Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton of East Newton, Co. York*, ed. Charles Jackson (Durham: Published for the Society by Andrews, 1875).

506 Ibid., 57.

which had serious economic consequences for the whole family, and more intimate ones for his sister. To help out she first transferred some of her own money to him,

to shew my deare affection towards my brother George in the time of his straights, for his better helpe in his estate, beeing sore burthened with debts, annuities, etc., I was willing to transferre £500 of my English portion to be receaved out of Ireland, which would have eased that of Kirklington.⁵⁰⁷

This turned out not to be enough, so more radical means were needed. In order to preserve the family, Alice Wandesford's mother listened to the suit to her daughter of a Mr Thornton, and closed a deal with him, subject to the young woman's agreement. Alice was not keen, but:

if it plesed God soe to dispose of me in marriage, making me a more publicke instrument of good to those several relations, I thought it rather a duty to me to accept my friends' desires for a joynt benefitt, than my own single content ...⁵⁰⁸

She was to be married only to bail out her brother, not, she goes out of her way to tell her readers, to satisfy any sexual desire. She didn't think much of her future husband's wealth, though decided that it would have to do, but clutching at straws expressed concern that Mr Thornton was a presbyterian, which would have ruled him out as a husband. He disobligingly assured her that he believed in “a moderated episcopacy, and kingly government”, which meant that he was godly and respectable enough to be her husband.⁵⁰⁹ With this escape route closed off she agreed to be married,

in obedience I owed to my deare mother's choyce; and, which was more encouragement to me, that I might be serviceable to my honored father's family in beeing instrumental to preserve or deliver it from the inevitable ruin fallen upon it. And by this meanes of my acceptance of this match, I might be a blessing to that noble family of my honored father from whom I am descended, and prevent the greedy lion which watched for his prey, to have devoured us up, roote and branch.⁵¹⁰

507 Ibid., 75; Kirklington was where they lived.

508 Ibid., 77.

509 Ibid., 79.

510 Ibid., 79.

After further haggling about money and property, the marriage was solemnised in December, 1651, the bride given away by her mother, despite the presence of her brothers, uncles, and cousins. In anticipation of what was to happen to her that night she was taken violently ill on her wedding day, but recovered and within a few weeks was pregnant. She lived discontentedly on into the eighteenth century.

His sister's sacrifice prompted brother George to make efforts on his own behalf, and he began negotiations for a bride. His mother and sister were living off income from his father's property, an arrangement George's prospective father-in-law proposed to revoke. George refused to co-operate so the proposed marriage was cancelled, and soon afterwards George was drowned in what may well have been a suicide.⁵¹¹ Two days earlier there had been “a great breach in their friendship” between him and his younger brother, Christopher, which

caused a very great anger against each other, which proceeded so hy, and caused them to have such animosity, as that they neither could be satisfied to receive the holy Sacrament”.⁵¹²

God worked through Alice, as He was accustomed to, and things between the brothers were patched up, but the quarrel may have been over scarce resources, and if this was indeed suicide, it could well have been connected with the money troubles George continued to experience.

Brother Christopher then promptly married the woman his brother had been courting, but unlike his brother was happy to co-operate with his father-in-law in getting his hands on his father's estate at the expense of his mother and sister. A sequestration imposed for royalist activities had been lifted, so things were easier, but this did not cause the younger brother to treat his mother and sister as they thought he should:

there was such unhandsome dealings to us [Alice and her mother], not to say dishonest, since my brother's marriage, as could neither induce her or my selfe to part with our estates without security. But I shall be silent in these things, which afforded us too much troubles and sorrowes, wishing rather to cover all things of the nature of disputes betwixt such neare relations.⁵¹³

511 Ibid., 65.

512 Ibid., 71.

513 Ibid., 75f.

The upshot was that he

cutt me totally of, or any of myne, from even having any benifitt of my father's will, by which I had very great dues.⁵¹⁴

The result was long-term penury, and a persisting sense of having been wronged:

Thus was I striped of all the great riches and honorable injoyments I had right unto, which I yealded to do for the good and quiett of this family, being unable in body or purce to resist this great pressur was laid for me.⁵¹⁵

Alice Thornton, as she had now become, is one of Stone's main witnesses for the importance of sisters, but she was clearly a bit mad and consequently an unreliable one. She gives innumerable instances of when God intervened on her behalf, as when she was at risk of drowning and God, probably in no sort of hurry to begin to have her company for eternity, gave her horse the strength to bring her to safety. One example to leave posterity more entertained than persuaded was when gossip was starting to go the rounds about her relationship, unquestionably indiscreet, with a local clergyman. A maidservant of a neighbour confronted her with the rumours, saying:

I was naught, and my parents were naught, and all that I came on was naught.⁵¹⁶

Mr Thornton kicked the impertinent girl downstairs and out of the house, but that was not the end of it, for the maid later died, and on her deathbed acknowledged that this was her punishment for being rude to Alice.⁵¹⁷ There is no indication in the narrative that this punishment might have been at all disproportionate.

Stone makes much of the touching story of how Alice Wandesford exchanged messages with her brother when he had smallpox by tying messages round the neck of the family dog, and as a result caught the disease herself (God saved her life). Stone evidently didn't read far enough to get to the "unhandsome dealings" of another brother, and in the context of the general

514 Ibid., 268.

515 Ibid., 269.

516 Ibid., 222

517 Ibid., 223.

unreliability and exaggeration the go-between story must be suspect. Put alongside her father's admonitions, however, Alice Thornton's book is of unique importance because of the coincidence of advice about how siblings were supposed to behave with evidence of how they actually did. If their sister is to be believed, one brother treated the family as his father would have wished, the other did not, and for her part she invariably as an adult continued to obey; her younger brother was not so dutiful.⁵¹⁸

The testimony of one aggrieved sister does not invalidate Stone's contention about the generally disinterested nature of relationships between brothers and sisters, but in this case at least there was competition for resources, and the main evidence of altruistic affection is in the readiness of Alice to do her mother's bidding and marry for the financial benefit of the whole family, not just for her own security. The case is an illustration of an obvious point: that families are groups of individuals with common interests that are often in conflict with private aspirations. Alice and George Wandesford subordinated their individual preferences for the benefit of the family group, Christopher looked to himself. Alice and George were at least partly influenced by moral obligations, what they perceived as their duty, in Alice's case entering into unwanted marriage. Christopher's allegedly ungenerous treatment of his mother and sister might suggest that his view of the balance of personal and collective favoured the former; on the other hand, he may have decided that the two women were a permanent charge and that the welfare of his own wife and children would be better served by allying himself with his wife's family. Individual and group interests do not necessarily coincide, and the corporate benefits of belonging to a family may come at too high a price.

AN ELDEST SON AND HIS DEPENDANTS: THE OXINDENS.

Henry Oxinden became head of his family when he was about twenty-one at the death of his father in 1629 (Henry's mother survived her husband by some years), and it's possible to trace the family's affairs over a number of decades. Unfortunately, though, the published letters are a selection made with an eye to narrative interest and to maintaining a particular view of rural English society of the period, which makes them attractive to read, but is sometimes frustrating (looking at the complete ms collection was not a practicable course). Despite this limitation, the letters give insights into this family in mid-seventeenth century Kent, when it went about its business of farming and hunting, of maintaining sociable relationships with neighbours and

⁵¹⁸ Wandesford, *Advice*, 3.

within the extended family, against a background of rising political turmoil and cautious engagement in the political world of London.⁵¹⁹ The new patriarch had three brothers and two sisters, though there is little about these sisters in the (published) letters, of which the dominant impression is how strongly the relationships of the family were articulated through money.

The oldest of Henry's brothers was James, an undergraduate at Cambridge when their father died, and the correspondence between these two brothers reveal Henry Oxinden as someone unquestioningly ready to do right by James, though the brothers had different views about the standard of living to which James was entitled. James's letters are a mixture of flattery and cajolery, forever asking for money, which he invariably received from an increasingly irritated Henry. After some years at Cambridge James transferred to Oxford, provoking an exasperated letter which starts by ticking James off for misdating his last letter, the usual request for money, dated "Feb. 27, 1637:

it should bee 36, for wee write not 37 till the 27 of March; but let that passe.⁵²⁰

Henry's annoyance, though, had a more tangible cause than his brother's new-fangled dating system, for

You say in your ... letter that you have r[eeceive]d in all since your departure from mee the summe of fourty 8l; now I thought good to satissfie you at what times I have sent you monies and by whom.

He goes on to list his disbursements, together with the names of the men carrying them, a total of £88, and observes that

it maketh mee have little heart to send up monies still at your demands, when you forget what you have received.

James's latest request was for £20, a sum which Henry couldn't immediately put his hand to (his shortage of ready money recurs in the family's correspondence),

519 Henry Oxinden, *The Oxinden Letters, 1607-1642. Being the Correspondence of Henry Oxinden of Barham and His Circle*. ed. Dorothy Gardiner (London: Constable & Co., 1933).

520 *Ibid.*, 118f.

they of whom I use to borrow monies being quite out of mony, soe as I know not without great trouble how to get it; wherefore as you have acknowledged a great deal of love to mee, do mee the kindness to recall that monies you have put out and save mee of the inconvenience, thus not doubting of you granting mee my request, it being one of the first that ever I requested of you, I rest Your truly loving brother... .

There was evidently a bequest entitling James to money, for Henry refers to “the monies I ow you”, but it is clear that James was living beyond his means, as undergraduates tend to, and later, when he was about to take orders, the older brother commissioned the necessary clothes himself, and set a price limit to the tailor. James eventually procured a living, though by now the brothers had started to disagree about religion and politics, in which, unusually, the younger brother was more conservative than the older. Henry thinks his brother is asking for trouble getting involved with a particular, unnamed, clergyman, but knows James

will now little regard my counsell, for hee thinks hee knows soe much more than I: ... besides his tenets are soe mightily different from mine as causes the more strangenes betweene us: my conscience tells mee that it is fitting there should be a reformation both in life and doctrine, and his, according to the Episcopall Cathedrall or prelatieall priests, needs not soe much that as a Religion which may advance the pompe and libertie of the clergie over the Laytie⁵²¹

How all this worked out is not recorded, and we don't, of course, know how the brothers got on when they were together.

The next brother, Richard, was apprenticed in London. He complained that his master had got married and started to beat his apprentices, so Richard wanted to change masters, and an uncle was involved in sorting things out, which proved expensive.⁵²² Richard then decided to become a soldier, and borrowed money from an aunt for his passage to Europe.⁵²³ The youngest brother, Adam, was also a cause of concern to his relations, and after a brief spell at sea returned to a directionless way of life.

Without knowing the details of their father's bequests we cannot be confident about understanding the lives of these young men, but it's clear that with Henry inheriting the lion's

521 Ibid., 299.

522 Ibid., 40 – 3, 59.

523 Ibid., 120ff.

share of his father's wealth the younger sons were left to make their own way in the world, which they did with varying success. James was expensively educated and equipped for a career in the church, though according to the DNB he got into financial difficulty and took the cloth to get a living, and died possessing modest wealth. The two younger brothers, apparently less educated and with limited prospects, were apprenticed to London merchants, but neither settled into commerce, though, again according to the DNB, Richard thrived as a soldier.⁵²⁴

The only sister-brother relationship to emerge in the published letters is marginal to the main story. Henry Oxinden's first marriage brought with it a brother-in-law, whose letters to his sister reveal a childhood of mutual caring in difficult family circumstances. She died after eight years of marriage to Henry Oxinden, leaving three children, and Oxinden soon started an odd courtship with a young woman who seems to have been some sort of ward. When he married her his children were aged 9, 7, and 6, the last two girls. His relationship with his children was not harmonious. He wrote to his new wife with instructions about his son's education: he was to follow his book and translate a chapter a day.⁵²⁵ Later he was angry because his daughter, aged 12, had refused a husband on whom Oxinden had decided: his wife is to tell the child that she has undone herself, and that he never wants to see her again. The girl subsequently married at 14, a match that brought a great deal of unhappiness. Henry's brother-in-law from his first marriage clearly felt that he had a special responsibility to his sister to keep an eye on the interests of her children, and less than total confidence in his brother-in-law's reliability in this respect, and comes over as an affectionate and reliable uncle who had been close to his sister.

POOR RELATIONS: THE LARGESSE OF JANE CORNWALLIS BACON.

The surviving correspondence of the family of Jane Cornwallis Bacon illustrates both the interdependency of family members and how fragile it could be.⁵²⁶ Her brother, Thomas Meautys, was a mercenary soldier, and, by his own standards, not well off.⁵²⁷ Absences abroad with his army meant that he and his sister saw little of each other, and distance and the military situation hindered their correspondence, but his claim that innumerable letters between them had gone missing in transit is unconvincing, for he had an ulterior motive in getting back in touch. On his marriage in 1625 he appealed to Lady Jane for help:

524 The DNB's confidence in its epitomes of these brothers' lives is surely misplaced.

525 Gardiner, Dorothy, ed., *The Oxinden and Peyton Letters, 1642 – 1670*, London, The Sheldon Press, 1937, 111.

526 Jane, Lady Cornwallis (1581 – 1659), m. 1. Sir William Cornwallis, 1608, he d. 1611, one son, Frederick; 2.

Nathaniel Bacon, 1614, (1585 - 1627), 3 children.

527 d. 1649.

Now, if it shall please you to set to your helping hand for to set us up, or to be a means to preserve us from falling in regard that our estates will not be great, you shall bind her as much as myself always to do you service, and we will acknowledge it with all thankfulness, and value you as one of our best benefactors.⁵²⁸

The sister coughed up, a “noble and discreet proffer and presentation” which received appropriately fulsome thanks, and an undertaking that the newly-married wife will be her sister-in-law's “servant and joyful pensioner”.⁵²⁹ Later in the year Meautys solicited, and received, £40, and two years later he was looking for another £100, with a promise to repay in due course, and again struck it lucky.⁵³⁰

His relationship with another sister was less fruitful. She at first attempted to settle an annuity of £200 a year on him, but this was compromised by legal difficulties, and the goodwill was short-lived.⁵³¹ His wife wrote to Lady Jane of her other sister-in-law:

she says were it not to redeem her brother's soul from Hell she would not assure any estate upon him; ...⁵³²

The reason was said to be dislike of the wife, but it could be that this second sister had realised that her brother had little to commend him. Lady Jane, meanwhile, went on sending money while he was campaigning in the Low Countries, accompanied by his wife.⁵³³ Requests for money continued to the end of the surviving correspondence.⁵³⁴

Jane Cornwallis Bacon had made two prudent marriages, and was comfortably off. How total was her brother's dependence on her is not clear, but the material benefits of their relationship were certainly all on his side. There had been little personal contact between sister and brother for many years, so the sister's generosity was not based on affection for someone to whom she was

528 Jane Cornwallis Bacon, *The Private Correspondence of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon, 1613-1644*, ed. Joanna Moody (Madison [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 125f.

529 *Ibid.*, 127.

530 *Ibid.*, 136

531 *Ibid.*, 125, note 170, 285,

532 *Ibid.*, 174.

533 *Ibid.*, 193 – 4.

534 *Ibid.*, 172, 237, 239, 241 (Mr Meautys saying often ... “if my sister fail me I do not know what will become of me and mine” with the tears staring in his eyes.), 249,253,

close. It may have been driven by a wish to maintain the family reputation. The brother and his wife associated with continental royalty, which they couldn't afford to do, and were living well beyond their means, though he complained regularly about not being paid for his military services. Lady Jane, may therefore have acted from a concern for the good name of the family deriving from a belief in the importance of reputation, even if it didn't come cheap.

It's more likely that she was just a nice woman on whom Thomas relied for more than money. One of his sons, Hercules, was being looked after by an aunt, the sister of Meautys's wife. When her father died, the sister wrote about Hercules to a Mrs Bridget Long, who had been caring for the child's day-to-day needs, and Mrs Long then wrote to Lady Jane, his other aunt:

truly it is high time the child were now taken into some better keeping, for albeit the nurse does her part to the utmost, yet he now begins to grow, and will look for better commons than her wages will bear.⁵³⁵

She adds that she had him with her for a fortnight, and that the change was good for him, he can “go and prattle a bit, and is very pretty company”. His aunt Bacon's allowance supported him, for his child's parents failed to leave enough money: in two years the nurse had earned nearly £18, but had received only £14 from the parents: Lady Jane contributed the balance.⁵³⁶ At this point Hercules's father wrote to Jane asking her to send the child over to him on the continent (which she was not prepared to do because she would be too frightened to go to sea herself), or, alternatively, to take the child in herself; this, of course she did.⁵³⁷ Meautys and his wife, meanwhile, complained that they had no news of another child, apparently living in Lancashire, and this dispersal of his family makes Thomas's occasional protestations of affection for his children seem a bit specious.⁵³⁸ Three years later Hercules was still with his aunt, though his sister had by this time joined her parents.⁵³⁹ Whether his sister's magnanimity can be explained by an ideological commitment to family, or by an innate warmth of personality, Thomas's other sister shared neither her loyalty to the family name nor her open-handedness, though this sister had a husband, and was therefore less of a free agent than Lady Jane, who was a widow, and hence independent.

535 Ibid., 187.

536 Ibid., 187, June, 1629.

537 Ibid., 203, April, 1630.

538 Ibid., 241

539 Ibid., 220.

Bridget Long's husband was Lady Jane's agent, responsible among other things for carrying money to her brother, and in a letter he makes it clear that he believes Thomas to be less than straightforward in his dealings with her.⁵⁴⁰ This confirms the strong impression of a parasitic relationship between an irresponsible Thomas Meautys and a possibly gullible but certainly conscientious sister with a developed sense of responsibility for her kindred.

DOROTHY OSBORNE.

The outline of Dorothy Osborne's relationship with her brother is given in Chapter 5, in part as indicating possible incestuous feelings towards her by this brother. Four general points can be made about the story. The first is that the Osborne letters confirm that brothers had no actual power in the matter of their sister's marriage and that they had no authority simply by virtue of being older males. That their sister had some independent means might have weakened their hold over her, but she was obviously not minded to defer to them out of any acceptance of patriarchal ideology, for all that she was traditional in her views, not any sort of protofeminist. She says she would have accepted her father's choice of a husband for her, but his health prevented him from exercising authority, and it didn't pass to his sons by default. The oldest son who became head of the family when his father died could decide where his sister was to live – not with him – but seems to have had little interest in her marriage.

Second, this family, and presumably many others, cannot be understood just in terms of rational self-interest, as a commercial firm engaged in a corporate enterprise, a group of people sinking differences in the interests of the group as a whole. This has often been taken to be the essential model of gentry families until well into the eighteenth century, with marriages arranged for purposes of family advancement, and the expectations of the rising generations being shaped accordingly. Not only were the Osbornes far from rational in their dealings with one another, these dealings were of a level of emotional urgency which overwhelmed the rational.

Third, these emotions were not on a simple scale of affection, but comprised anger, guilt, and mirth, among other things. There were attempts at emotional violence, countered by sarcasm and petulance, and communications sometimes effectively broke down. The wider family seems to have taken sides, though, again, not on grounds of narrow rationality, but, possibly, sometimes

540 Ibid., 195f.

just to make mischief.

Fourth, some sibling relationships carried more charge than others. When one brother, Robert, died, his sister's grief was moderate. She makes no reference to his death in the first letter after it, occurred and later merely observes in passing how unattractive she is in mourning. When she does refer to her brother's death directly, it is to remark that her older brother's fortunes have been improved by it, and how glad she is that it is her brother, not Temple, who has died:

Sure I am not insensible only from ill nature and yet I will swear I think I do not afflict myself half as much as another would do that had my losses. I pay nothing of sadness to the memory of my brother, but I presently disperse it with thinking what I owe in thankfulness that tis not you I mourn for.

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATION: THE BARRINGTONS AND THEIR KIN.

The surviving letters of the Barringtons, an Essex family, cover a period from the summer of 1628 to the autumn of 1632.⁵⁴¹ They are mostly addressed to Joan Barrington, neé Cromwell⁵⁴², widowed in 1628 at the age of seventy. She was the aunt of the future Lord Protector, and the mother of at least nine children, and it is the letters of these children and their spouses which have survived through the efficiency of her steward whose account books supplement the information of the letters. The family had strong Protestant affiliations, and was increasingly uneasy about political developments: Joan's late husband had been imprisoned for a refusal to comply with a forced loan to the crown in October, 1626, though his incarceration was relieved - presumably - by the company of his wife and one of his daughters, herself estranged from her husband. He was released in January, 1628, but also in prison at the same time was one his sons-in-law who became one of the main correspondents.

The elderly matriarch was not devout.⁵⁴³ Letters survive from clergymen urging her to think on her imminent dissolution and make her peace with God, but the recurrence of this theme suggests that she was not attentive to such advice. The principal tension to be made out from the letters, though, is between the old lady and her eldest son, for she retained control of much of the

⁵⁴¹ Arthur Searle, ed., *Barrington Family Letters, 1628-32* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983).

⁵⁴² c1558 -1641.

⁵⁴³ The firm assertion to the contrary in DNB is completely at odds with the evidence of the letters.

family's cash, as well as being in no hurry to hand over houses and land to him, albeit she was, generous enough with her money, paying out regularly to children and grandchildren, and leaving a substantial amount of cash for bequests on her death.

It is difficult to judge the quality of the emotional relationships within generations of Joan Barrington's children. One exception is in a letter of 1631 in which Thomas, the new head of the family, abandons the habitual formality of much of the family correspondence in an affectionate comment about the pregnancy of his sister Joan (Everard):

We are glad and desyre God to continew your health, and for my honest and beloved playe fellow. I joye at her grunttles, for upon experience I have found the more before the less behind; yet God send her well and God send us a joyfull meeting, that we congratulate owr tulipps and slash oute the old smock into biggers, for the little 'haunse in kelder' (aske Hawte this in English). I shall pray for my brother Everard's health, that he may gett som more fine boyes for a fayering at St James. And now my dewty to you, my love hartyly commended to my deear playe fellow, my good affection to my sister Lamplugh and the rest, sisters, brothers, friends, children I comitt us all to God ...⁵⁴⁴

This can't be fully construed: “Kelder” means “womb”⁵⁴⁵; a “gruntling” is a pig's snout⁵⁴⁶, which may refer to a childhood nickname; I have no suggestions about “haunse”, though from the context it must mean a foetus, and no idea who Hawte was. What is unmistakable, though, is the tone of joking affection, and the two references to a playfellow imply affectionate memories, of the sort of intimacy which Stone detected. But this is unusual in this cache of letters, for most of them are couched in conventional expressions of affection and esteem, which may be entirely sincere, but could also be a cover for exasperation, rivalry, or dislike. The main impression, however, is of a group of people bound together in mutual dependency, a unit which whatever its internal dynamics combined to take care of individual and collective interests. So finding a suitable husband for a granddaughter Joan, known as “Jug”, was a task for the extended family and potential spouses were assessed, and promising young men enquired after, by different family members. Jug had money of her own as the heiress of her mother's first husband, and helping her protect this was a concern of her relations, including her stepfather, William Masham, “being

544 Ibid., 191.

545 OED

546 OED.

ready to do for as for my owne”, and repeating the same commitment again later.⁵⁴⁷

There was, it seems, a disinterested quality to the family's unity, a readiness to pool resources rather than pursue individual advantage. But what is perhaps most surprising about these letters is how little content is in them. There is occasional political news, cautiously expressed, but a third to a half of a typical example will consist of expressions of goodwill and esteem, the rest of the letter concerning family business, much of it to do with the progress of pregnancies and the whereabouts of the matriarch who moved from one branch of the family to another. If antagonisms existed they were carefully hidden, as were any particularly close affections. This is a body of letters, in short, that have more to do with the process than the content of communication, maintaining family unity by keeping in touch rather than exchanging information.

The various branches of the family were not geographically close, so letters were a necessary link, but the linkage seems ceremonious, a constant assertion of the existence of kinship, rather than any exploration of its nature, just a businesslike keeping in touch. Thus a letter of about December, 1628, from Mary Gerrard, the seventh child, married to Gilbert Gerrard, is endorsed in her husband's handwriting and includes with the endorsement a note to Tobias Bridge:

Toby I pray give my nurse 44s for a quarter's wages due at Christmas and give her maid 2s, and I will repay you when I see you.⁵⁴⁸

Another letter from Gilbert himself concerns only domestic routine:

I left your daughter and all mine well on Monday morning, saving my boy Will at Nurse Bedle's, who hath bine sometime feverish and well by fitts, so we cannott guesse at his disease, but I hope it's only his teeth.⁵⁴⁹

Will recovered.

The Barringtons were a group of people keeping relationships in repair through regular communication and a tight rein on private emotions. There is little in the letters that relates

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 106, 132.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 46; this useful evidence about the cost of a wetnurse was referred to in my discussion of Juliet's nurse.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 54.

specifically to brothers and sisters, but there is no trace of the anger of the Osbornes, the occasional fractiousness of the Oxindens, the quarrelling about money of Alice Thornton's family, or the exploitative dependency of Thomas Meautys

CONCLUSION.

Parish records and family reconstruction have produced a usable body of hard evidence about certain aspects of early modern family life, but can tell us nothing about the quality of relationships in these families. Court records yield the occasional glimpse into intimate lives, but obviously there is nothing systematic to be learned from such sources. This is hardly surprising when modern sociologists and anthropologists with all the academic tools available to them have done little better, so that a practitioner of these disciplines and entirely familiar with all the research on marriage can still attend a wedding utterly at a loss about what this couple see in one another. It would be absurd, therefore, to attempt any general conclusions from the records of these families, though in answer to the question about whether sibling relationships were ever poisonous, it is apparent that they sometimes were.

But these relationships in these families were also often cordial, suggesting the utterly banal recognition that there was a range of experiences rather than any sort of norm. At one end was the fractious standoffs between Dorothy Osborne and her brother, at the other Thomas Barrington's tender concern for his sister's "gruntles". One of Thomas Meautys's sister would see him in hell before giving him money, another was lavish with it. One of Alice Thornton's sisters did right by her, another, according to her egocentric perception, did not. The Oxinden brothers grew apart, ostensibly because of religion, but possibly because they had never been close.

The impact on family relationships in these families of the practice of primogeniture is unmistakable, though perhaps not in the straightforward way implied by Thirsk and Stone. Securing his patrimony was not easy for the new head of the Barringtons, for his mother was apparently careless about the strictly legal situations, though we don't, of course, know what her powers were under her late husband's will, and in none of the cases I have been discussing did the oldest son seem to have come into total possession of the family wealth. The dynamics of the relationships of all these families were, however, to some extent articulated by the power of whoever held the purse strings, but interpreting this purely in terms of resources would be too simple. Family life requires a compromise between the interests of the whole group and of

individuals within it, interests which change over time. The complete dependency of a newborn child requires its parents to sacrifice their convenience for its requirements, a sacrifice likely to become less willing when the child is at university and overspending. When an older brother inherits a situation of dependency, as happened with the Oxindens, any previously negotiated balance between the needs of the whole family and of the individuals within it is likely to become obsolete. At this point individual personality may overcome ideology. Alice Thornton's older brother acted like a father to the rest of the family, behaving according to prescription, though this did not prevent a bitter falling out with his younger brother. When this brother took over, he was not so selfless and subordinated the convenience of his mother and sister to his perceptions of his own interests.

APPENDIX 2.

SISTERS AND BROTHERS IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE* AND ITS SOURCE.

Measure for Measure was written a quarter of a century before *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*, probably in the same year as *Othello*, and certainly during the period when Shakespeare was writing his great tragedies. It was for many years grouped with *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well* as “problem” plays, originally because they dealt with problems, though later because they offended the sensibilities of a generation of critics who preferred comedy to be wholesome and lyrical, adjectives that could never be applied to *Measure for Measure*. So the possibility that the play as we have it was not all written by Shakespeare (which indeed it may not have been) was welcome to those critics who disapproved of it. Quiller-Couch, for example, detested it, even as he was editing it, and was especially scathing about Isabella (there is “something rancid in her chastity”).⁵⁵⁰ Wilson called the play “acid”, and remarked on its “disillusionment and cynicism”, and that in it “the air is cheerless and often unwholesome, the wit mirthless”, and concluded from this that it was only partly by Shakespeare.⁵⁵¹ Though such strictures now seem absurd, it remains the case that these three plays are seldom performed however intellectually interesting they may be, and however much their sardonic humour suits a modern taste.⁵⁵²

Desire and death go together in *'Tis Pity*. Giovanni is a Faustian character, rash and impenitent, courting damnation. Annabella is repentant at the end, convinced by the friar of the sinfulness of her love, a love expressed in moving language and gesture which give it a tangibility to set against the murderous ethos in which it arose and which destroys it. Here it is different from *Measure for Measure*, another play about a sister and her brother, in which the only affectionate love is that between Juliet and Claudio, its consummation a capital crime which occurs before the plot gets under way. Ford's play ends murderously, in contrast to the duke's tidying everything up in Shakespeare's, though the ending of *Measure for Measure* is notoriously enigmatic despite its formal resolution of the plot, and this has contributed to the qualified admiration the play has attracted, a circumstance it shares with *'Tis Pity*.⁵⁵³

550 *The Works of Shakespeare. Measure for Measure*, ed. Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1922). xxx.

551 John Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare: a Biographical Adventure*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1937, 116.

552 On an autobiographical note, my father was killed in a war, and I have always felt more in tune with *Troilus and Cressida* than, for example, *Henry V*, whose martial rhetoric I find repulsive. After the battle, the king reads the butcher's bill, and after naming three aristocrats and a gentleman dismisses the other English casualties as “none else of name”. The wives and children of these men could no doubt put a name to them.

553 *Measure for Measure* was first printed in the First Folio of 1623, and shows signs of having been edited since its opening performance in 1604, with evidence of some abridgement and occasional insertions. Modern textual scholars tend to see the hand of Middleton in the likely adaptations. Thomas Middleton, *Thomas Middleton: The*

The play's title is supposed to echo words of Jesus:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and what measure ye mette, it shall be measured to you again.⁵⁵⁴

Perhaps it does, though the phrase has a proverbial quality, but the play's Christian referents are early brought out by Isabella's plea for her brother to be spared the rigid justice of Angelo:

Alas! Alas!

Why all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
And he that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. How would you be
If he, which is the top of judgement, should
But judge you as you are? Oh think on that,
And mercy then will breathe within your lips
Like man new made.⁵⁵⁵ (II.ii.73)

Although it is Claudio's body, not his soul, which is at risk, alluding to the Atonement locates the play clearly within a Christian context, and Isabella's invocation of mercy here is undoubtedly Christian, though her next appeal is secular, similar in content to that of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (both draw on Seneca):

.....Well, believe this:

No ceremony that to great one longs,
Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
Become them with one half so good a grace
As mercy does. (II.ii.59)

But she then goes on to argue, with perhaps a further glance at the Sermon on the Mount, for the

Collected Works, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1542 – 4. The authorship does not affect my argument .

⁵⁵⁴ *Matthew*, VII: 1.

⁵⁵⁵ Brian Gibbons, ed., *The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Measure for Measure*, Updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); references are to this edition..

merits of doing as you would be done to. Portia's speech is a wordy string of platitudes (where else would rain drop from heaven but upon the place beneath?), Isabella's is terse and intense, in keeping with the seriousness of the play as a whole. Christian allusions and scriptural quotations do not, however, necessarily make it a play which endorses Christian values, though it can also be seen as a satire based on them.

The disapproval of Quiller-Couch and Wilson, however, was for a play which others have seen almost as a work of piety. Wilson Knight, once an influential critic, assimilated the play into a Christian ethic of which he saw it as a parable, and observed that the sheer beauty of Isabella's argument for mercy based on Christian theology gives it a special authority: Shakespeare could not have written that well if he didn't mean it.⁵⁵⁶ More recently Marx, too, sees *Measure for Measure* as having “the design of a biblical parable”, and to make his point, he finds significance in the names of the characters, so that Escalus, for example, suggests the scales of justice, a line of argument hard to square with the play's main villain being called Angelo. Marx's argument does not rely on semantics, though, but on the resemblance of the play's totality to scripture:

With its happy ending in affirmation of community, redemption of debt, resolution of confusion, overriding of law, and fulfilment of desire, the Christian Bible is also a kind of divine comedy, as suggested by its alternative title of Gospel or “Good Tidings”.⁵⁵⁷

It would be a mistake to dismiss such a reading of the play as as wishful thinking on the part of the devout, for the scriptural echoes are unquestionably present, and Kirsche is right in his assertion that it is

astonishing ... how many critics are unwilling to take the play's Christian ideas seriously,

in support of which he names a long line of culprits which stretches from Samuel Johnson up to his own time.⁵⁵⁸

Johnson was a pious man who he took particular exception to the duke's sermon to Claudio (III.i.5 – 41) in which a speech of thirty-six lines makes no reference to the Atonement, nor to the

556 G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire : Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, with Three New Essays*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (London: Routledge, 1989).

557 Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 79 - 80.

558 Kirsche, Arthur C., “The integrity of 'Measure for Measure'”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 28, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 89 to 104.

possibility of life after death.⁵⁵⁹ Instead there is a series of stoical reflections on the tribulations of this life as a reason to welcome death, and Johnson would have none of it:

I cannot without indignation find Shakespeare saying that “death is only sleep,” lengthening out his exhortation by a sentence which in the Friar is impious, in the reasoner is foolish, and in the poet trite and vulgar.⁵⁶⁰

My reason for bringing in Johnson is that if he could find something “impious” in the play, then it cannot be seen as exclusively Christian in its moral reference. Ignoring the play's Christian references is bound, therefore, to distort understanding of it, but so is insisting on it as Christian only.

The presence of other ethical systems in the play comes out in the most sustained serio-comic scene in it, when the constable Elbow attempts to arraign Pompey and Froth for “what was done to Elbow's wife” in Mistress Overdone's house, or wherever the outrage occurred (and we never discover what was supposed to have happened).⁵⁶¹ Elbow is a revival of Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and mangles words in the same way, but an important point emerges from one of the jokes. He presents his prisoners to the court

and do bring in here, before your honour, two notorious benefactors. (II.i.46)

When he is corrected (“Are they not malefactors?”), he continues:

If it please your honour, I know not well what they are: but precise villains they are, that I am sure of, and void of all profanation in the world that good Christians ought to have.

“Precise” occurs regularly in the play, usually pejoratively, and was a word commonly applied to Puritans, so an entertaining digression into a sub-plot unsettles moral categories: malefactors do good, profanation is a Christian virtue, villains are, perhaps, Puritans. The joke continues with “suspected” muddled with “respected”, but by this time Angelo has left

559 There may be echoes of *Job*, 14, 12, in this speech: Noble, Richard, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, London, S.P.C.K., 1935, 226; the identification is strained, and the speech comprises sentiments in general circulation.

560 Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson.*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1968), Vol. VII, 193.

561 Cf the unexplained outrage in Phoenix Park by Earwicker in *Finnegans Wake*.

Hoping you'll find good cause to whip them all.

The comic scene has the effect of questioning the retributive justice shortly to be advocated by Angelo. Nobody is whipped, though Pompey is warned that he will be if he continues in his present courses. Escelus's pragmatic leniency, therefore, stands in contrast to Angelo's rigidity, but Pompey remains impenitently obdurate, and these present courses are not defensible even to himself, so there is no closed-off "lesson" about the scene, only a series of comparisons.

If there are no settled moral perspectives on events in the play, questions of justice and mercy with which is concerned cannot be simple, and nor can the central ethical choice with which I am concerned, that of Isabella faced with the opportunity to save her brother's life in exchange for what she sees as her chastity. The dramatisation of this dilemma is essentially solipsistic, for there existed no guidelines to help resolve it, but it could be recast as a question about how far the obligations attaching family members to one another should go. Isabella has no doubt about her priorities:

Then Isabel live chaste, and brother die:
More than our brother is our chastity. (II.iv.185)

Claudio's initial response is to agree, but he quickly thinks better of it:

Sweet sister, let me live.
What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue. (III.i.133)

The appeal to nature as the ultimate arbiter, its claims superior to rival moral considerations, provokes Isabella to a complicated counter-argument:

Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest to take life
From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?
Heaven shield my mother played my father fair,
For such a warped slip of wilderness

Ne'er issued from his blood. (III.i.137)

Claudio's "cowardice", in other words, shows a weakness in the family bond. The organising imagery here is that of procreation. To "make" a man carries the sense of conception, which if it's the outcome of a sister's sexual activity becomes an act of incest. The metaphor of grafting a cutting onto a tree suggests that Claudio was not conceived by his parents, but was an alien growth implanted in the family. The possibility that he was the outcome of adultery might explain the weakness of his bond with his sister and his indifference to the importance of her honour: his father's blood is not in him, hence his shortcomings as a family member. The same line of reasoning, of course, could explain the weakness of Isabella's concern for her brother.

Isabella's logic is workable enough: if a proper brother would behave in a certain way, and this particular brother does not, it follows that this is not a proper brother. The problem with such an argument is that it depends on the mother's adultery, which is impossible, so the logic slips into rhetoric - "what should I think?" - as a means to persuade Claudio of the unnaturalness of his preference for life over chastity. This is a direct answer to his argument that nature would condone as technical any compromise of chastity in following the demands of family obligation and saving a life. The logic of Isabella's position, though, is that there is in fact an imperative quality to family relationships, since to avoid this imperative she must argue that her relationship with her brother is not an actual one, and she turns the argument round, so that it is not her sacrificing her brother, but his proposed sacrificing her chastity that is unnatural.

These intellectual convolutions resemble Giovanni's brilliant series of paradoxes on the theme of what is natural, and are a formal version of the contortions of Elbow's linguistic undermining of recognised moral categories in dissolving distinctions between them. But despite the ostensible rationality of her argument, Isabella's morality is early shown to be in fact non-rational. Her initial plea to Angelo was a logical one: all souls were once damned, then saved by mercy, therefore mercy is appropriate for Claudio. The logic is not faultless, but it makes sense, though she doesn't rely on reason alone, but draws for support on a scriptural injunction, "Judge not, that ye be not judged", and there is a lot of logic in *Measure for Measure*, though austere rationality is regularly set in contrast with more sensual modes of apprehension. Thus Isabella's logic, sparsely expressed, runs up against the breathtaking language of Claudio's poetry:

Ay, but to die and go we know not where,

To lie in cold obstruction and to rot,
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice,
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world, or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling; 'tis too horrible.
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death. (III.i.118)

The resemblance of the last four lines to Hamlet's list of life's tribulations is obvious, but Hamlet's fear of "something after death" is here realised in imagined detail.

Claudio's speech is justifiably famous. The poetry depends on the existence of an afterlife which is not a Christian one, although at the start of the scene Isabella had spoken of Claudio as an ambassador to heaven.⁵⁶² Paradise, for Claudio, is in this life, however bad conditions in it are. The soul's destination is unknown, the body is destined to "cold obstruction" and decay. "A kneaded clod" recalls that Adam was made from earth, which is the only reference in the speech to the Christian narrative. Isabella, on the other hand, has no doubts about where she is going after death, provided she behaves herself:

Better it were a brother died at once,
Than that a sister by redeeming him
Should die for ever. (II.iv.107)

The word "redeeming" as well as the concept of eternal death locate Isabella's metaphysic somewhere different from her brother's imaginings, but they also recall Claudio's strange response when he is first arrested:

562 III.i.56.

Thus can the demigod Authority
Make us pay down for our offence by weight
The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will;
On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just.⁵⁶³ (I.ii.102)

“The words of heaven” means the Bible, so the rueful fatalism equates the arbitrary nature of Venetian law with the inexplicable mercy of God granted to whom he “will”.⁵⁶⁴ It calls into question, though, Isabella's confidence in soteriological matters.

Logic and imagination, therefore, jostle with theology in this exchange between brother and sister, dominated by Claudio's speech which overwhelms by its power and beauty. Within the scene are the components of the lovers' difficulties in *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*, the ultimate futility of logic as used by Giovanni, the ambiguous quality of nature in relationships between siblings, a political context of uncertain justice, and a dubious fit between law and morality. Ford resolves things after a fashion by carnage, Shakespeare merely provides a plot to sort things out, without resolving the issues.

Central to both plays is the possibility that some sins are worse than others. Claudio puts it to his sister that sex under duress is hardly a serious offence:

Sure it is no sin,
Or of the deadly seven it is the least.

This idea that some sins are worse than others had been important in Angelo's attempted seduction of Isabella. This had started as chilly logic, and deteriorated into blackmail only when she rejects the bargain he is offering. To start with, however, she is taken through a step by step argument, though she initially fails to understand what he's getting at. There are difficulties for modern audiences from a text that may be faulty, but the general argument can be made out, and provides an important set of qualifications to the apparently simple choice which Isabella finally realises faces her.⁵⁶⁵ Angelo first gets Isabella to concede that there exists a moral hierarchy in

563 Editors have had trouble with these lines: there may be a line missing after “weight”; the meaning seems clear enough, however.

564 *Romans*, IX; 15.

565 The following analysis closely follows that of Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare: A Study of Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Antony and Cleopatra* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1965).

which murder is worse than fornication: both are mortal sins, but human law makes murder more serious. His second step in the argument is to interpret her refusal to save her brother's life as tantamount to murder, a greater sin than the one which would secure his life. His next point is that a sin committed out of necessity would not jeopardise her soul. Finally he argues that a sin committed to save a life becomes a virtue, a "charity in sin", when, as everyone knows, charity is the supreme virtue.⁵⁶⁶

Angelo's reasoning is unavailing because Isabella fails, or refuses, to understand any except the first point, and he finally acknowledges that "your sense pursues not mine", and concludes that she is either stupid or devious. But what he has provided, at least for the audience, is a rational morality, so although the logic is in the context meretricious, it is not in itself specious, and audiences going through the argument may well have felt that his conclusion made sense. His starting point, that some sins are worse than others is an appeal to common sense rather than theology, and as murder obviously is worse than fornication, so sexual misconduct is less bad than other failings.

Claudio's relegation of sex to the least of the deadly sins is of a piece with this common-sense penology, but it's not obvious to his sister, who, continuing the obtuseness of which Angelo has complained, asks

Which is the least?

To this Claudio responds, referring to Angelo and himself

If it were damnable, he, being so wise
Why would he for the momentary trick
Be predurably fined? (III.i.109)

"Momentary trick" I take to mean the act of love, contrasting with "Predurably" which reintroduces eternity. "Fined" carries the sense of a light punishment as well as playing on finite and infinity. The thinking is that of several characters in the play, that the importance of chastity is exaggerated, Pompey and his associates take it for granted that some measure of sexual transgression is inevitable:

⁵⁶⁶ *I Corinthians*: XII.

Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the youth of the city? (II.i.197)

asks Pompey, the bawd, of Escalus the magistrate. Even the virtuous provost observes

All sects, all ages smack of this vice

and expresses disbelief that Claudio must die for it. (II.ii.5)

Not that sexual behaviour is portrayed as anything edifying or attractive. There is little, if any, suggestion that sex can be an expression of love, a mode of tenderness or of mutuality. Its recreational aspects, certainly, are present, though not in the sense that sex is entertaining in itself, but as something to make jokes about as undignified or foolish, jokes which are nervous because they concern the dangers of sex, pregnancy and syphilis, and in Claudio's case, death. There is little evidence in the play that pregnancy might be welcome, only that it is to be feared: so part of Isabella's objection to Angelo's proposal is the possibility of an illegitimate son:

I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born (III.i.184)

This is the same law that had been destabilised by the comic trial of Pompey in which malefactors were called benefactors, and made human fallibility a foil to the rigid certainties of Angelo which follow. His position is, initially, that the law takes priority over other human claims:

It is the law, not I, condemn your brother.

Were he my kinsman, brother, or my son,

It should be thus with him: he must die tomorrow. (II.ii.82)

The language here is direct, without metaphor or other weakening of its uncompromising clarity, but it's explicitly human law, Gower's "lawe positif", though Isabella's counter draws on the law of God and its inbuilt mercy

PENITENCE AND REGRET.

Mercy is God's primary attribute in the *Book of Common Prayer*, in which His “property is always to have mercy”, and it's on this that Isabella calls in her initial approach to Angelo. Later, however, in her angry parting with her brother, mercy has become a bawd, and its free availability had been questioned by Claudio's reference to the divine “will” when he is arrested. The Prayer Book, moreover, makes it clear that only sincere penitence will do, and this implicit difference between being truly penitent and being sorry about being caught comes out in the duke's interrogation of Juliet, itself of doubtful authority, since he is not the friar he pretends to be and not able to provide the spiritual services he claims:

...but lest you do repent,
As that the sin hath brought you to this shame,
Which sorrow is always towards ourselves, not heaven,
Showing we would not spare heaven as we love it,
But as we stand in fear, (II.iii.30)

Juliet's reply expresses the correct penitence, significantly spoken before she knows of her lover's condemnation:

I do repent me, as it is an evil,
And take the shame with joy.

From this point onwards, however, Christian doctrine, particularly its teaching about salvation, become less and less in evidence. The language of judgement and damnation feature in the exchanges between brother and sister, but there's little about redemption, and as the play moves on, human morality replaces the religious. At the same time, law gives place to legalism, as in the quibbling argument persuading Mariana to save the day by a bed trick:

He is your husband on a pre-contract:
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
Sith that the justice of your title to him
Doth flourish the deceit. (IV.ii.69)

Natural law, and the explicit claims of natural affection, are muted in the play, or at least the natural law on which Giovanni relied is not expressly present in the equation, and references to nature are few. Claudio's argument that saving his life would be virtuous however brought about is because "Nature dispenses with the deed", which is to invoke nature as the supreme moral arbiter, but the argument is not prominent in the play. It fails to persuade Isabella, who concludes the argument with an angry outburst:

Oh, fie, fie, fie!
Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade.
Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd,
'Tis best thou diest quickly. (III.i.148)

These are her last words to him. They are on stage together at the end of the play but are given no dialogue, and their silence is treated differently from one production to the next. Until he is "unmuffled", Isabella believes Claudio to be dead, and in some productions she rushes over to him to be angrily rejected, in others their delight is mutual.

CHASTITY.

Chastity and virginity are not the same thing, though Isabella uses the two words interchangeably. A virgin is chaste, a chaste person is not necessarily a virgin, for married people were expected to be chaste but also to enjoy (in moderation) the pleasures of the marriage bed. Isabella, though, makes it the supreme virtue in this play of moral hierarchies, for if she could save Claudio's life by sacrificing her own she'd not hesitate:

Oh, were it but my life
I'd throw it down to your deliverance
As frankly as a pin. (III.i.103)

Her hymen is another matter, however, and the affectionate joking after the wedding night in *'Tis Pity* puts this in perspective. It invites questions about Isabella's values which go on being an issue throughout the play, initially by Angelo's getting her to acknowledge that some sins are worse than others. The distinction between chastity and virginity is explicit in Isabella's readiness to sacrifice Mariana's virginity which can be done without jeopardising her chastity because she

and Angelo are contracted. This is the action that has divided opinion about her. I have already mentioned Quiller-Couch's dislike of the play and of Isabella, "a bare procuress".⁵⁶⁷ An alternative perception, also with its origins in late-Victorian culture, was that of R. W. Chambers, a perceptive critic, who claimed that

If we fail to see the nobility of Isabel, we cannot see the story as we should.⁵⁶⁸

Chambers was engaged in unabashed special pleading, but the normative little verb "should" instructs us to ignore the whisperings that Isabella's chastity may not be all that it might be. Her brother, before he realised how deeply he was in trouble, had suggested that

... in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art
When she will play with reason and discourse,
And well she can persuade. (I.ii.163)

I take this to mean that she was both articulate and that she sent out erotic signals, but what has tended to put such admirers most at a non-plus is Isabella's response when she has finally understood what Angelo is proposing:

... were I under the terms of death,
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (II.iv.100)

This speech has caused arousal, embarrassment, or merriment to critics in equal numbers, for it reveals an Isabella subject to unmaidenly fantasies which, have, needless to say, been of great interest to modern interpreters using concepts from popular psychology, sexology, or psychoanalysis.⁵⁶⁹ The startling language, however, conveys the point that, for Isabella, chastity is

567 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), xxx.

568 R. W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), first published 1939, 287.

569 For example, Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers in King Lear*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

more important than life, which aligns her with the virgin martyrs of Roman Catholicism, not of much importance to the Church of England, and in this respect there was probably less familiarity among audiences with the alternatives of death or chastity as they are set up in the play, and Isabella in consequence may have been less comprehensible in her attitude.

SOURCE.

Isabella is not saving herself for marriage, for she is about to enter a cloister when the play starts, so the value of her virginity is not as a bargaining counter in the marriage market, and she offers no scriptural or theological reasons for its importance. Chastity is a given. But so, in the normal run of things, is family loyalty, and Isabella's intransigence is Shakespeare's addition to the plot which he adapted from an earlier dramatic treatment of the same story, two plays of 1578 by George Whetstone.⁵⁷⁰ The main differences between Shakespeare's play and its source is that there is no bed trick in the latter, and to save her brother's life the heroine accedes to the proposal to ransom him by sex, with the proviso that the seducer agrees to consider – no more – marriage afterwards. Angelo's arguments to Isabella are in effect taken from Whetstone, though used by the brother not the would-be seducer. These are that some sins are worse than others, so the lesser sin is to be preferred if doing one is unavoidable, and that sins committed under duress don't count. Cassandra, the Isabella-figure, expresses motives which are stronger in Whetstone than in Shakespeare, for there are a number of references to the claims of nature over brothers and sisters, which are much less emphasised in *Measure for Measure*. Although these claims could be taken for granted, otherwise the dilemma of Isabella/Cassandra would be meaningless, in Whetstone, Promos, the Angelo figure, acknowledges the motives of Cassandra (Isabella):

Faire Dame, I see the natural zeale thou bearest to Andrugio. (453)

Andrugio, the equivalent of Claudio, also makes explicit the claims of blood, when trying, successfully, to persuade her to save his life at the expense of her virginity. She's concerned about her reputation, but he replies:

Nay sweete sister, more slaunder would infame
Your spotles lyfe, to reave your brothers breath

⁵⁷⁰ George Whetstone, *IPromos and Cassandra, IPromos and Cassandra* (1578): in Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Source of Shakespeare*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, Volume II, pp. 442 – 513. References are to page numbers in this edition.

When you have powre for to enlarge the same,
Once in your handes doth lye my lyf and death.
Way that I am, the self same flesh you are,
Thinke I once gone, our house will goe to wrack: ... (454)

This reverses Isabella's use of the shared parentage which she effectively repudiates in her anger at Claudio's preference for life over her virginity. In *Whetstone*, however, the balance of "sins" is different, for faced with two evils, a brother's death is clearly worse, and having yielded to Promos, Cassandra goes to the king for redress, pleading that what she has done was the lesser evil:

He crav'd this raunsome, to have my virginity:
No teares could worke restraynt, his wicked lust was such.
Two evils here were, one must I chuse, though bad were very best,
To see my brother put to death, or graunt his lewde request:
In fyne, subdue with naturall love I did agree ... (498)

The king reassures her that she is blameless:

Thy forced fault was free from evill intent,
So long, no shame can blot thee any way. (499)

Virginity and chastity are disaggregated, in short, so Shakespeare's making Isabella conflate them is a pointed comment on the value system she is guided by.

Having married Promos, Cassandra then transfers her obligation to her husband who is under sentence of death for the supposed murder of her brother:

Nature wyld mee my brother love, now dutie commaunds mee
To preferre before kyn or friend my Husbands safetie. (507)

This distinguishes between nature as the prompt to human behaviour, and duty, which makes the demands of marriage paramount.

Shakespeare, it seems, intentionally reversed the claims of natural affection over technical chastity, and summarised the Whetstone ethic into Claudio's plea:

What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue. (III.i.137)

Isabella venomously disagrees. But, of course, the adaptations to Whetstone give an immeasurably richer play, and provides a far more subtle dramatisation of the moral issues prominent in *Measure for Measure*, those in the interface of law and justice, and their bases.

CONCLUSION.

Isabella's obstinacy about her “chastity”, therefore, was, therefore, Shakespeare's invention, and her valuation of it over her brother's life drew on no familiar or generally accepted code. Whetstone showed that chastity was not compromised by sex engaged in under duress, what we should now see as rape, and in his plays the demands of family loyalty and affection were paramount. The effect of this is to complicate *Measure for Measure* and Isabella in particular. Her interpretation of chastity was not altogether idiosyncratic, however, for it resembled that of Lucrece who was often held up for admiration as the embodiment of chastity, which depends on equating it with physical integrity, as Isabella equates chastity with her own, but not Mariana's, virginity. Yet Lucrece was a suicide, a far more serious sin than fornication, and *Measure for Measure* depends on moral priorities based on a hierarchy of sins, without offering any endorsement of anybody's behaviour in it. The duke seems to be intending to marry Isabella, though she has not been consulted on this, so her virginity is in jeopardy, unless the duke is, as Lucio says, impotent, a final twist in this intriguing play.

Virginity and its status were touched on in Chapter 7 because they were relevant to remarriage, but we can query how much Isabella's valuation of it was shared by Jacobean audiences, and how much a brother's life because he was a brother. Had Angelo attempted to strike a deal to exchange sex with Isabella for the life of, for example, Bernadino, the moral equation would have been entirely different. Ford's play is about an excess of fraternal affection, Shakespeare's, perhaps, about an insufficiency. The range probably accurately reflects the distribution of sibling affection

in early modern England, with at one end Manningham's Mrs T, trying to get her brother hanged, and at the other Sidney lying with his sister, or so Aubrey reported.

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