

“And that’s true too”:
New Essays on *King Lear*

Edited by

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-1367-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1367-9

“THE LUSTY STEALTH OF NATURE” DESIRE AND BASTARDY IN *KING LEAR*

YAN BRAILOWSKY

Rather than broach the issue of legitimacy, political or otherwise, this paper discusses what bastardy meant in the early modern period. It reflects on Edmund's claim that desire and bastardy are “naturally” linked. Bastardy is not only the product of desire, or even desire itself. In King Lear, it is the source of singular eloquence—a bastard language. The relationship between desire and bastardy exceeds the confines of what occurs to the sole known bastard character in the play. Rather than portraying an emblematic bastard figure, King Lear reveals the widespread morbid appeal of self-destructive “bastard desires” and identities in early seventeenth-century England.

John F. Danby (1949) argued, in his study on *Shakespeare and the Doctrine of Nature*, that *King Lear* explored two contrasting views of Nature. One was shared by many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, notably Francis Bacon or Richard Hooker, and thought Nature was linked with reason, custom and religion; the other would become more popular a few decades later with Thomas Hobbes, for whom Nature is an independent and brutal force. This division mirrors the split between Lear and Gloucester's children: whilst Cordelia and Edgar show their fathers respect and embody benign nature, malignant nature is exemplified by Edmund, Goneril and Regan whose filial piety proves deceptive. Both fathers' obsession with their children's real or alleged bastardy—be it in the legal or in the moral sense—seem to justify these initial distinctions. Speaking about bastards, Edmund claims:

[We] in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull stale tired bed
Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops
Got 'tween a sleep and a wake.

(1.2.11–15)¹

As shown by Alison Findlay in her book on *Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (1994), Edmund's speech rested on a commonplace: bastards are the children of love and not the fruit of the performance of matrimonial duty:

Bastards' natural gifts are explained with reference to their conception. Jerome Cardan (1580) puts forward the view that children born out of wedlock are more robust because, when they are conceived, "the seeds [of the parents] are mingled on account of very vigorous love." Thomas Milles (1613) agrees and adds a less clinical explanation, saying that bastards "are begot [...] with more agreeable conformity of willes, and far sweeter Union of the spirits" than legitimate children. (Findlay 1994, 130)

The list of like-minded contemporary authors goes on. But to what extent do desire—"the lusty stealth of nature"—and bastardy feed, or even prey, upon each other? While desire denotes longing for fulfillment, bastardy suggests a feeling of loss produced by half-hearted recognition: a parent may own his/her bastard child, the child remains "illegitimate." The interplay between hope and loss is all the more significant as *Lear* builds upon a series of losses, be they material or symbolic, starting with the conspicuous absence of maternal figures from the stage.²

In the anonymous *Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, published in 1605, less than a year before Shakespeare's *Lear* was first performed, the play opens with a scene in which the ailing monarch mourns his queen.³ Leir makes his entrance and speaks to his nobles, requesting their "grave advice" (l. 5). His Queen has just died, he has one foot in the grave, and because he fears that fathers do not know how to take care of daughters, he believes it wise to quickly fit them with good husbands. Shakespeare does not make Lear's motives so explicit, nor does he make his daughters' motherlessness a prime motive for his decision to divide his kingdom.

¹ I quote from the latest Arden edition, edited by R. A. Foakes (1997), which offers a conflated version of Q and F. All quotes from Shakespeare in this paper are from *King Lear*, unless noted otherwise. For other plays, I will quote from the latest Arden edition. Some portions of this paper have previously appeared in my book on *King Lear* (Brailowsky 2008).

² For Coppélia Kahn (1986, 36), "the absence of the mother points to her hidden presence."

³ See Bullough (1973, 337–402). I will quote *Leir* from this edition, indicating lineation in parentheses.

Contrariwise, Shakespeare's play opens with a short scene in which Gloucester and Kent briefly mention Lear's decision to divide his kingdom, before cutting short any serious-sounding political discussion, and lengthily indulging in salacious banter on Edmund's bastardy. In lieu of starting off with Lear's frank speech, Gloucester repeatedly (obsessively?) alludes to the "whoreson's" absent mother through a number of unflattering periphrases. The scene suggests more than a mere causal relationship between Gloucester's lechery and a rise in illegitimate births, however. Bastards "challenge the predominant patriarchal culture," according to Findlay (1994, vi). In *King Lear*, Edmund eloquently subscribes to this viewpoint when he expresses his aversion for "Legitimate Edgar" (1.2.15) in his first soliloquy. In a Folio addition to his speech, Edmund further exclaims: "Fine word, 'legitimate'!" (1.2.18).

In this paper, I wish to concentrate on what bastardy "meant," and reflect on Edmund's claim that desire and bastardy are "naturally" linked. Bastardy is not only the product of desire, or even desire itself. In *King Lear*, bastardy is the source of singular eloquence, if not the source of language itself—a bastard language. As I shall try to show, the relationship between desire and bastardy exceeds the confines of what occurs to the sole known bastard character in the play. Even if Edmund does express, or is the object of, desire, he is not alone to "stand up" for lust in this play—one can "smell a fault" (1.1.15) elsewhere, notably with Gloucester, Lear and the King's elder daughters. Likewise, Edmund is not the only bastard: all of Lear's and Gloucester's children are, at some point, suspected of bastardy. Rather than portraying an emblematic Bastard, *King Lear* reveals the widespread morbid appeal of self-destructive bastard desires and identities in early seventeenth-century England, at a time when a generation of illegitimate children born in the late sixteenth-century was reaching maturity.

Slander and stealth

That bastards were the product of the "lusty stealth of nature" was well-known—or, at any rate, it was a commonly held belief, backed by contemporary statistics which signaled an increase in the rate of illegitimacy in the late years of Elizabeth's reign. The distinction between what is known and what was believed rests on historians' observation that "Illegitimacy is baffling [...] because it is highly complex, though apparently straightforward, and because no very convincing general account of why illegitimate births occur as they do, and why they vary as they do" (Laslett and Oosterveen 1973, 255). Therefore, what is important

is not so much to try to determine the objective reasons behind bastardy, but rather to explore what bastardy meant, both explicitly and implicitly.

First and foremost, bastardy explicitly posed the problem of the bastard child's legal status. Thus, Edmund's claim that bastardy and desire are naturally related, ironically points to the fact that his legal status is the product of "the plague of custom" (1.2.3), not of nature. What bastards commonly desired, i.e. what they longed for, was first and foremost official recognition—paternal love came a distant second: Edmund's designs are unmoved by Gloucester's assurance that his legitimate heir was "no dearer in [his] account" (1.1.19). Using both legal and political terminology, Edmund questions culturally-defined groups' legitimacy to determine his personal affairs:

Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive *me*?
(1.2.2–4, my emphasis)

Edmund demonstrates an acute sense of self-awareness, evidenced by the way in which first person pronouns are emphasized at the end of his lines, suggesting the manner in which they should be read. In his view, national law ought to give way to the rule of natural law, as signified by the spondee and personal pronouns in the opening line of his apostrophe to Nature: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound" (1.2.1–2)

Contrary to the legal implications of illegitimacy, moral considerations were not necessarily an explicit issue. Although there are other examples of Shakespearian evil bastard brothers, as with Don John in *Much Ado* (1598), bastards could also be heroes. Thus, in *King John* (1596), the Bastard is shown as a positive force, a true "English patriot" (Manheim 1988, 126). According to Michael Neill, in early seventeenth-century England, negative connotations of bastardy were a relatively recent "addition" to their name. What mattered was the bastard's inability to inherit:

The *filius nullius* [...] was not so much the son of nobody, as the *heir* of nobody. [...] the condition of illegitimacy began to incur a significant degree of publicly articulated moral opprobrium only towards the end of the sixteenth century, when it attracted the attention of Puritan reformers on the one hand and of Poor Law administrators, keen to protect the parish from the charge of unwanted infants, on the other. (Neill 1993, 273)

For this reason, Kent's comment on Edmund in the opening scene is bitingly ironic. When he calls Gloucester's "issue [...] so proper" (1.1.16–17),

[his] banter turns on a cruel pun, since to be a "proper" person in seventeenth-century England (as James Calderwood has pointed out) is "to be propertied [...] to possess," while Edmund's alienation from what Lear calls "propinquity and property of blood" (1.1.115) renders him an "unpossessing bastard" (2.1.67), fundamentally improper. (Neill 1993, 283)

In *King Lear*, land is the basis for property, and landed property is what defines men: one has a Christian name only when one is not a landowner—all other characters are known by their toponym. In short, Kent, Gloucester, Albany, Cornwall, France or Burgundy are their land. This motif explains why Edmund's perpetual scheming manifests itself with his desire to have Edgar's land: "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land" (1.2.16), "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit" (1.2.181). Gloucester will oblige, assuring Edmund: "of my land [...] I'll work the means / To make thee capable" (2.1.83–5), shortly after having disowned his legitimate heir. Appropriately enough, the manner in which Edmund expresses his desire to disinherit his brother and to convince Gloucester of Edgar's treachery is through slander, which literalizes the object of his envy, since at the heart of the word "slander," one finds the term "land."⁴ This interpretation is obviously etymologically unsound, since slander is derived from the Old French *esclandre*, itself an altered form of the Latin *scandalum* (OED, 1989), but in case of *Lear*, this Isidorian derivation remains symbolically meaningful.

Envy was commonly found among bastards, according to Bacon: "Deformed persons, and eunuchs, and old men, and bastards, are envious" (Bacon 1625, Essay IX, "Of envy"). True to this dictum, Edmund envies his brother's lands and title. But Bacon suggests another notable feature of bastards which we also find in Edmund's first soliloquy: not only is he "base," he is also a "deformed," "unnatural" child, despite the fact that bastards are also often euphemistically referred to as "natural children." Revealingly, the Bastard's speech begins with an apostrophe to Nature, followed by a description of his natural, i.e. physical (as opposed to mental or moral), qualities:

⁴ Envy and desire are often two sides of the same coin. See, for instance, the collection of essays edited by Pascale Hassoun-Lestienne (1998).

[...] my dimensions are as well compact,
 My mind as generous and my shape as true
 As honest madam's issue.
 (1.2.7–9)

At first glance, this would seem to contradict Bacon's contention that bastards were envious and "deformed persons." But if Edmund claims he is not deformed, it is because his deformity is not of the physical kind, but lies solely in his mind—unlike Richard III, for instance, who was obsessed with bastardy of both kinds (Hunt 1997).

Equivocal Nature

By combining an outwardly comely body with an inwardly twisted mind, Edmund stresses the arguably equivocal "nature" of bastards, as they are simultaneously both natural and unnatural. Cotgrave mentions a French proverb: "A bastard may be good, but nature makes him bad" (Cotgrave, 1611).⁵ For Neill,

[There are] linguistic contradictions that expose cultural double-think, the bastard could be at once "spurious" ("unnatural") and yet a "natural child"—just as the term "natural child" itself in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century usage could be used to distinguish *either* legitimate or illegitimate offspring—an ambiguity nicely caught in Gloucester's embrace of Edmund as "loyal and natural boy" (2.1.84). (Neill 1993, 285)

One can thus set not only Nature against nurture, or "custom," one can set Nature against itself. Edmund is natural in appearance (i.e. "proper," manly, and so on), but unnatural in his designs (i.e. "deformed," harboring parricidal and fratricidal thoughts). Thus, in *King Lear*, appeals to Nature paradoxically seem to be destined to further morally unnatural causes—in this case, that a son should turn against his father and brother. After all, bastards ought to have an edge of some type to survive: an ability to eschew ethical considerations imposed by custom or "the curiosity of nations." In a pre-Darwinian reflection, John Donne argued that "sith Lawes robb them [bastards] of Succesion and civill benefits they should have some thing else equivalent [...] so Bastards *de jure* should have better witts and abilities" (quoted by Findlay 1994, 130)—if only the ability to learn how to dispossess others.

⁵ In Cotgrave's French: "Bon bastard c'est aventure, mais meschant c'est de nature."

Edmund is not alone in his morally unnatural exploitation of malignant nature. When Lear curses Goneril, he repeatedly apostrophizes Nature to turn Goneril's progeny into an unnatural, or "disnatured torment":

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear [...]
 Create her [Goneril's] child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart disnatured torment to her.
 (1.4.267–75)

The distinction between natural and unnatural children is thus constantly blurred. As early as in scene one, Lear claims Cordelia is "a wretch whom nature is ashamed / Almost t'acknowledge hers" (1.1.213–14), and France echoes Lear's pronouncement, establishing a link between freaks of nature, moral twistedness and the unnatural: "Sure her offence / Must be of such unnatural degree / That monsters it" (1.1.219–21). As noted by Adelman (1992, 108), when Lear believes that his natural children have grown rebellious, he accuses them of being unnatural, i.e. of bastardy—Goneril has become a "degenerate bastard" (1.4.245), and Lear exclaims to Regan: "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, / Sepulchring an adulteress" (2.2.320–21).

In their respective calls on Nature to wreak havoc on their kin, Lear and Edmund do not wish to return to a natural world of primitive anarchy, when there was neither rules to be enforced, nor ruler to enforce them. Instead, they both wish to regain what they believe is their property. Edmund goes one step further. Not only does he reject the ordinary rule of law, he mocks all beliefs in laws of transcendental origin. In his study of European patterns of marriage and kinship, Jack Goody noted how bastardy, far from being a natural concept, was one of the Church's obsessions, particularly in the sixteenth century:

While God is called upon to stand up for bastards [by Edmund in *King Lear*], their disabilities if not their creation were largely a matter of the ecclesiastical law. It was a problem that came to the fore in the sixteenth century when the Catholic reformers attempted to counter the growing threat of Protestantism. (Goody 1983, 192)

To quote but one example, Agrippa argued in his *Commendation of Matrimony* (1545) that "the frutes of matrimony were of god not of nature. And of this the bastarde children be called naturall: but those that come of matrimony, be onely lawfull" (quoted by Findlay 1994, 129).

Edmund rejects all such beliefs. Accepting divine right, as well as any other right derived from sources external to oneself, would deny his claims. If he was (pre)destined to be and remain illegitimate and dowerless,

simply because his “nativity was under Ursa Major” (1.2.129–30), there would be no point in rebelling:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars, as if we were villains on necessity [...] drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence [...] (1.2.118–25)

The Bastard stands against “heavenly compulsion” (1.2.122) or astrological influence. His desires are of a decidedly “base” nature, literally down-to-earth, as demonstrated by his craving for land and property, but also by his unbridled lust.

Bastard language

By undermining such fundamental notions as divine intervention, the influence of the stars, the difference between the natural and unnatural, the relationships between kin and kin, *King Lear* calls on us to rethink the very concept of bastardy. I have discussed the legal consequences of bastardy. I now wish to suggest a number of implicit meanings of the term, using contemporary sources and wordplay.

As a bastard, and as shown by John Florio’s gloss for the terms *spurio* and *adulterino* in his English-Italian dictionary (Florio 1611), Edmund is a counterfeiter and an adulterator. Firstly, he pretends to feel for what he may well despise. In itself, this is unsurprising: all actors are counterfeiters, and even Edgar calls himself a counterfeit when he plays the Bedlam beggar, claiming the sight of a mad Lear is so heart-breaking it will “mar my counterfeiting” (3.6.60). Secondly, Edmund actually produces counterfeit objects by writing a letter in his brother’s “hand” (1.2.56 and 67) or “character” (62). More generally, as the fruit of adultery (and as an adulterer himself), he is continually tempted to adulterate, i.e. falsify or corrupt, the truth (Neill 1993, 281).

Edmund’s ability to write and carry letters (albeit counterfeit ones), coupled with his fondness for apostrophizing the audience, can cast him in the unlikely role of the world-weary philosopher, providing the audience with instruction (as, for instance, with his tirade against superstitious beliefs in astrology quoted earlier). One of the Bastard’s first lines in the play is an ominous covert pun directed at Kent: “Sir, I shall study deserving” (1.1.30). In addition to claiming that he will endeavor to be worthy of Kent’s regard, Edmund is playing on the homonymic antonym “disserving,” expressing, in effect, his intention to be of disservice to all

(Barish and Waingrow 1958, 350). This line therefore suggests that Edmund is carefully working on his wicked schemes, but it may also literally tell us that Edmund is actually studying (what we would now call political science, for instance, or philosophy, law, and so on), as if he were Hamlet's evil *alter ego*, momentarily called back from his studies by his father. If Hamlet is a contemplative philosopher, as evidenced by his ceaseless disquisitions on the nature of man, Edmund is likewise keen on philosophizing on man, society and the universe—only Hamlet is Prince of Denmark, a hero, and Edmund a “base” bastard, or anti-hero, the one perhaps too prone to doubt, and the other too ready to spring into action.⁶

Edmund is a “conveyer” ready to use any means to “convey business”, as when he tells his father: “I will seek [Edgar], sir, presently, convey the business as I shall find means and acquaint you withal” (1.2.101–02). He is also a “conveyer” in that he serves as a messenger to “transport purposes,” like Oswald.⁷ Lastly, Edmund also ceaselessly moves from one place to another, and from one status to another. As shown by Patricia Parker's analysis of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, in which the deposed king famously exclaims to the traitors assembled around him: “Conveyers are you all!” (*R2*, 4.1.316–7), the notion was linked with usurpation, translation, carrying, “going between,” treachery, disloyalty, and, more importantly, with bastardy (Parker 1996, 154). The term “conveyer / conveyor” was particularly rich in meaning in Elizabethan parlance, and the *OED* defines it not only as “One that conveys, carries, or transmits,” but also as “A nimble or light-fingered thief,” and “One who transfers property” (*OED* 1989)—as with Edmund's theft of his father's letters and title. The bastard's innate propensity for theft is further suggested by the fact that he is the fruit of “the lusty stealth of nature” (1.2.11), as “stealth” was a by-word for “theft,” etymologically and semantically.⁸

Edmund's position as prime “conveyer” of the written word in *King Lear* goes hand in hand with his ability to displace the meaning of words themselves, notably through puns. Anthony Gilbert (2000) has analyzed what he calls Edmund's “interrogative puns,” in a reading which attempts to deconstruct puns in Edmund's first soliloquy, unearthing in the process a number of rhetorical figures such as antanaclasis and polyptoton, as in the play between “bastard,” “base,” “bastardy / base-tardy” (a reference to

⁶ On comparisons between *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, see Foakes (1993) and Brailowsky (2008).

⁷ Suspecting foul-play between her sister and Edmund, Regan argues that Oswald could just as well “transport her purposes by word” as by letter (4.5.22).

⁸ In his drivel as Poor Tom, Edgar suggests animal comparisons for stealth: “[...] hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness [...]” (3.4.91).

tardiness and a pun on “*lag* of a brother,” 1.2.6), “legitimate / legiti-*mate*” (Edmund claims he is Edgar’s *leg-*, i.e. “legal,” “mate” or equal), and so on, in a potentially endless series of puns.

In a world in which kings are turned out-of-doors, upstart bastards become earls, legitimate children are spurned and disinherited, letters are counterfeit and oral promises of love are broken, one no longer knows what to believe. In other words, bastardy is not only a legal and moral category, or a moral “fault” which must be “acknowledged,” as Gloucester claims to have done time and time again (1.1.15 and 19), its existence affects language itself, causing it to double meanings. It is as if words turned against themselves, saying one thing, while meaning another, issuing from an uncertain origin. The very notion of a bastard language springing from disputed linguistic quarters, one might add, was still a contemporary concern. English was still in the process of legitimization and consolidation as a courtly, “literary” language, displacing other languages in the process (notably Latin, French and Italian). It is perhaps not surprising that *Lear*, in addition to questioning the notion of legal legitimacy and primogeniture, should also dispute the foundations of language in scenes in which characters seem to be uttering pure nonsense (notably with Edgar/Tom or with Lear on the heath, in acts 3 and 4).

In fact, one could argue that a process of bastardization of language occurs throughout the play, and not only in Edmund’s flamboyant soliloquies. This process can be observed, for instance, when Lear first seeks to elicit proofs of love. In the opening scene, Lear makes a request to his daughters that is not unlike Volumnia’s in *Coriolanus*, when she asked her son to woo the plebeians—hypocritically if need be, using

[...] such words that are but roted in
Your tongue, though but bastards, and syllables
Of no allowance to your bosom’s truth.
(*Cor.*, 3.2.55–7)

Nicholas Crawford (2004, 244) calls this an instance of “bastard language [...] language whose issuance lacks the full integrity and tangibility of the speaker.” One can interpret Lear, Goneril and Regan’s speeches in the opening scene in this manner, as disembodied language which not only “expresses the mind’s growing alienation from the body” (Crawford 2004, 243), but a language which expresses a form of alienation necessary for the production of desire. In his study on *Shakespeare’s Language*, Frank Kermode noted how

Goneril is using what rhetoricians called “the topic of inexpressibility,”

standard fare in the eulogy of kings and emperors [...] Regan follows with the well-established topical formula that Ernst Curtius calls “outdoing,” or the “*cedat*-formula”—“let her yield”: her sister has expressed Regan’s sentiments quite well, “Only she comes too short.” (Kermode 2000, 185–6)

Hyperbolic expressions of this kind are necessary to produce desire, by designating the existence of an object of desire which cannot be expressed, let alone attained.

Bastard desires

In the case of *Lear*, one could even argue that it must not be attained. In the scene when Lear divides his kingdom, the king’s legitimacy is not questioned, nor is he ever suspected of bastardy. Yet he expresses Edmund’s “bastard desire” to be recognized or acknowledged by his kin. What is more, Lear might even be harboring the same illegitimate, lustful thoughts for his daughters than Gloucester’s illegitimate offspring—only Edmund is conscious of his doings: “To both these sisters have I sworn my love” (5.1.56). In other words, one can take Lear’s “love test” in the first act at face value, with its incestuous connotations, and attempt to construct “a fictional pre-history of the play” (Leslie 1998, 35).

One such fictional reconstruction is *A Thousand Acres*, a Pulitzer-prize winning novel by Jane Smiley (1991), which rewrites the Lear tale through the eyes of Ginny/Goneril. In Smiley’s story, the reader learns that the elder daughters have been sexually assaulted by Larry/Lear, their father. Viewed from this angle, the father’s request that his daughters tell him how much they love him strikes the reader as utterly inappropriate, rather than an instance of whimsical behaviour occurring “When majesty falls to folly” (1.1.150), as in *Lear*. The reasons for the youngest daughter’s silence and the father’s outburst of violence then becomes, in Smiley’s rewriting, not proof of the youngest daughter’s love for her father, but of her anger and disgust.

Other critics have eschewed fictional reconstructions of this kind, suggesting instead that the scene portrays a different type of psychoanalytic transfer, or “conveyance,” in which Cordelia is the “daughter-mother,” rather than the “daughter-wife”:

[...] we might suppose that the emotional crisis precipitating the tragic action is Lear’s frustrated incestuous desire for his daughter. [...] I want to argue that the socially-ordained, developmentally appropriate surrender of Cordelia as daughter-wife—the renunciation of her as incestuous object—awakens a *deeper emotional need* in Lear: the need for Cordelia as

daughter-mother. (Kahn 1986, 39–40, my emphasis)

This reading stems from Kahn's interpretation of Lear's "*hysterica passio*" (2.2.247), and from evidence of male anxiety and subsequent attempts to impose patriarchal authority throughout the play.⁹

There is yet another explanation for Lear's actions and bastard desire: they can also derive from envy, in line with Bacon's suggestion quoted earlier that "old men, and bastards are envious." One could argue, for instance, that Lear is envious of his daughters' love for their husbands.

In the old *Leir* play, the love test is the king's "sudden stratagem" (l. 78) to trick his youngest daughter into accepting to marry the King of Brittany, despite her wish to remain celibate. The other sisters have already chosen their husbands. The love test is not meant to determine, as in Shakespeare's *Lear*, to whom the king the "largest bounty may extend" (1.1.52), for Lear has already decided to divide his kingdom evenly: "No more, nor less, but even all alike [...] / Both old and young shall have alike for me" (l. 78). Leir wants his youngest daughter to marry; his design was not, as with Lear, "to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (1.1.124–5), as if he were "reserving" her, rather than one hundred knights.

In Shakespeare's play, the love test becomes a way to ascertain the king's daughters' exclusive love for him. Lear's stratagem fails, and his desire to hear Cordelia's declaration of love is thwarted by her acknowledgement of a natural bond of kinship, which teaches her to measure her love: "I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more no less" (1.1.92–93), in an equanimous expression recalling that of the King in *Leir*, quoted earlier ("no more, nor less"). Cordelia will give Lear "Nothing" (1.1.87 and 89) or, at best, "half [her] love" (1.1.102). In the end, Lear will have to make do with only half his daughters' love, as illustrated by the manner in which his train is progressively cut until it is reduced to nothing—"What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or five?" says Goneril, before Regan asks: "What need one?" (2.2.450 and 452).

Regan's one-liner is followed by Lear's famous "O, reason not the need" speech (2.2.453ff.). This speech, which implicitly opposes need and desire, can be contrasted with an earlier speech by Goneril, in which Lear's eldest speaks of epicurism, lust and desire—the first time Shakespeare uses the term "epicurism" (Pollock 2009, 147). Epicure distinguished natural, and non-natural desires, and Lear's desires clearly veer towards the latter, seeking to fulfill artificial and unrealistic desires

⁹ On the female genitalia as a source of anxiety and desire, see Laroque *et al.* (2008, 101).

(such as glory or immortality), all the while wallowing in a surfeit of natural, but unnecessary, pleasures. In the words of Goneril:

Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires,
Men so disordered, so debauched and bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a graced palace. [...]
(1.4.232–37)

Against these arguments, Lear opposes human desire, or desire that makes men and women human: “Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (2.2.455–56). In the scenes that follow, Lear will become such a beast, roaming half-naked on the heath in the middle of a storm—turning into the detested figure of the beastly Other, uttering nonsense.

The desire of the (bastard) Other

For Lacan, desire is constructed in discourse, through language—as shown, in part, by the well-wrought manner in which Lear expresses his desires in the first two acts. Lacan’s famous dictum, “Desire is the desire of the Other,”¹⁰ suggests desire does not have as object a material body, as if what Lear really desired was simply to engage in an incestuous relationship with Cordelia, his favorite daughter, or as if what Edmund really desired was to become Regan and Goneril’s lover. Rather, the object of desire is the radical Other, that which is both different and fundamentally unattainable.

King Lear offers three notable illustrations of this principle, in the likes of Edmund, Gloucester and Lear, who happen to be the only characters who explicitly mention bastardy in the play.

In the case of Edmund, the radical Other is Edgar, who is not only Gloucester’s legitimate but also his eldest son. In his first soliloquy, Edmund enviously rails against legitimacy and primogeniture, suggesting that it is Edgar who fulfills Edmund’s desire—by stealth. Even when Edgar plays the role of Poor Tom, he is actually stealing his brother’s idea, for it was Edmund who had said that he would play the role of Poor Tom: “My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o’Bedlam” (1.2.135–36). Similarly, Edmund will not be allowed to enjoy Regan or

¹⁰ “Le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre” (Lacan 1966, 628).

Goneril's love, or even his own newly acquired lands and title for long. His brother will again step up to strip him of everything, first by giving Albany intercepted letters which incriminated Edmund (Edmund is thus hoist by his own petard), then by challenging Edmund in a medieval trial by combat.

There is much irony in the fact that Edmund should wish to imitate his brother in wanting to reach "the top," as his brother seemed to do the reverse, reaching "the basest" position of the Bedlam beggar. In fact, just as Edmund rehearses his brother's transformation into Edgar-Tom, Edgar-Tom later imitates or takes the place of his lusty brother, claiming he used to be an adulterous bawd, "One that slept in the contriving of lust and waked to do it" (3.4.87–88). More ironic still, Edmund's motto, "the base shall top the legitimate" (1.2.20–21), sworn before the gods, is ultimately illustrated by the fact that the basest character, Tom of Bedlam, eventually becomes heir to Gloucester and even, perhaps, king of Britain, in a pattern which upholds, in the words of Margreta de Grazia (1996, 30–1), "the precise course of primogeniture and succession."

In the case of Gloucester, death is symbolized by Dover cliff which fulfills the earl's morbid desire, due to his shame at having fathered a bastard. Gloucester's suicide attempt comes last in a string of attempts at ridding himself of this shame, i.e. of something which he does not wish others to see (his lust, and the fruit of his lust, Edmund). He first tried to pass off his adultery as a joke with Kent. He then hoped he could discredit his elder and legitimate son, Edgar, basing himself on Edmund's counterfeit letter, which he read with great eagerness, as shown by his insistence on sight: "Let's see [...] Let's see, let's see" (1.2.35 and 43). Edgar's purported "unnatural, detested, brutish [villainy]" (1.2.76–77) would have excused his adultery. As this proves ineffective to allay Gloucester's shame, the earl himself seems to suggest that he should be blinded by Cornwall (Brailowsky 2008, 61–63.), perhaps hoping that by losing his sight, he would also dispel his shame. Alas, even blinding does not curtail Gloucester's ability to see and be seen, quite the contrary: "I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.21). Worse still, his blinding adds to his shame: in addition to fathering a bastard, he wronged his legitimate son.

At this point, Gloucester no longer seeks the pleasures of the *petite mort* his "lusty stealth of nature" desired in his youth. Rather, he seeks death itself, the ultimate tool capable of ridding him of "[his] snuff and loathed part of nature" (4.6.39). Why does Gloucester wish to hurl himself off Dover cliff? As it happens, Dover is the most minutely described location in *King Lear*. In addition to providing dramatic suspense by delaying Gloucester's suicide, Edgar's hypotyposis serves to insist on the

earl's blindness, real and symbolic. But Dover cliff serves another purpose: Jonathan Goldberg (1993) calls "Dover" the *locus* of desire, underlining the illusion of theatrical performance and of visual representation. Like desire, Dover is the place which one hopes and thinks one can attain, but which cannot be attained, let alone represented. In the end, Gloucester's (imaginary) fall from Dover cliff not only literalizes the idea of man's Fall (Gloucester was tricked by "the fiend, the fiend," 4.6.79), the experience proves as brief and anticlimactic as a *petite mort*.

In the case of Lear, the Other is none other than Lear himself, at once father and ruler, demi-god and a "foolish, fond old man" (4.7.60). In his wish to be freely acknowledged as a loved father and as all-powerful ruler (an impossible acknowledgment, as it is a double bind), Lear reverses the process of constitution of his identity. By dividing his kingdom, he begins by severing his body politic. His daughters then proceed to further divide up what remains by reducing Lear's retinue. Unsurprisingly, we then learn that the king's heart, the seat of emotions and of the soul according to Hippocratic physiology, "Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws" (2.2.474)—a sign not only of physical and emotional, but also of mental fragmentation.

At this point, Lear has become mad: his lecherous "bastard self" has taken over, and wanders half-naked on the heath, making repeated references to "adultery" (4.6.109-10), wishing to "let copulation thrive" (4.6.112), and obsessing about female genitalia (4.6.120-25). Yet, in an earlier statement, Lear condemns adultery: "O, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself" (4.6.83-84). As recalled by Neill (1993, 281), "the Latin *adulter* came to mean not just an adulterer (or, in Vulgate Latin, the offspring of adultery: a bastard), but (usually in the form *adulter solidorum*) "a counterfeiter or adulterer of coin;" while *adultero* similarly acquired the sense "to falsify, adulterate, or counterfeit." The alternation between verse and prose in this scene further suggests the king's alternating rejection of, and owning up to, bastard desires. The ensuing confusion echoes Oswald's baffled words about Albany: "What he should dislike [most desire (Q)] seems pleasant to him, / What like, offensive" (4.2.10-1).

Bastard texts

As suggested by these last quotes, *King Lear* itself is a bastard text. Sometimes called a "History" (Q1), sometimes a "Tragedy" (F), blending verse and prose, with "matter and impertinency mixed" (4.6.170), important textual differences between Q and F point to rewritings or

revisions critics have sometimes attributed to Shakespeare (Taylor and Warren, 1983). Others, such as Foakes (1997) in the Arden edition, prefer conflated, i.e. bastardized, versions of *King Lear*, skirting the issue of the text's "legitimacy." Even Findlay (1994) takes but a cursory glance at this issue, and at Shakespeare's bastard characters in general. In the words of Sonia Nolten:

Most incomprehensible of all is Shakespeare's exclusion from a discussion of "bastard texts," which never mentions the fact that he, unlike Thomas Heywood, saw fit to allow all but his poems to "passe as *filii populi*... bastard [and] without a father to acknowledge [them]". (Nolten 1995, §4)

Generic indeterminacy, conflicting editions, bastard texts... all play an important part in the manner in which *Lear* is to be interpreted. What matters is not only what the characters desire, and how they desire it, but also what the audience is after—hope and redemption? Cruelty and despair? Whereas Nahum Tate (1681) removed all references to bastardy and violent desire (such as adultery) in his adaptation, Gothic and romantic fiction would rediscover how desirably dangerous lechers could be. In the words of Thersites, another famous Shakespearean bastard: "I am a bastard too; I love bastards: I am a bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind, bastard in valour, in every thing illegitimate" (*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.7.16–18).

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