

CHAPTER I

Presumptive fathers

When Ben Jonson wrote that his dead son was ‘his best piece of poetry’,¹ he was not merely following a common convention of analogizing writing and fatherhood, but tapping into a deep well of feeling about children, poems and what they mean to one’s sense of selfhood. Elizabethan and Jacobean poets make paternity a central preoccupation: it is a model for all forms of achievement (poetic, political and economic) and provides a way of imposing some unity on one’s life and one’s work. By figuring oneself as a father, or by focussing on biological generativity, one could create a sense of aesthetic order and literary authority, the idea or model of paternity also acting as a means of relating the public and private spheres. Yet it is a mistake to think of this as being founded on a stridently confident and unified notion of patriarchy; male writers were anxiously aware that paternity was a position of presumption in Tudor and Stuart England: it was presumptive in that a man could never be *entirely* certain that he was a father; it was also presumptuous in that it involved taking on a role and name that was properly God’s (as Matthew 23:9 has it – see below). The idea of paternity, then, was alienated, never quite wholly possessed by an individual. Owing to the presence of a virginal woman on the throne, taking the place of the ultimate patriarch, paternity was further marginalized in Elizabethan England, despite being the central role of masculine identity. Such tensions persisted into the reign of James I, even though that king developed an increasingly insistent paternalistic ideology. Conceiving of themselves as fathers in various ways, poets from Sidney to Jonson tried to resolve these tensions and, though they may have failed to develop the secure and unified self-images they sought, they succeeded in creating a literary tradition that was both highly personal and able to make significant interventions in the public sphere. Three major poetic purposes are served by focussing on paternity: poets create unified but alienated voices for themselves, use images of generativity to establish new accommodations

between the sexes, and reflect on the different spheres into which an individual may invest himself.

'*Pater semper incertus est*', runs the Roman legal proverb; '*mater certissima*' – that is, paternity is always uncertain, but maternity is the most certain thing of all. This simple fact implies a tremendous effect on the whole of human psychology (and that of other species), as sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists have emphasized.² If we are looking for a cross-cultural human 'universal', it is surely in this area that we will find it; yet it is also very much subject to cultural variation (as well as variation on the basis of individual peculiarities).³ Precisely because paternity is uncertain, an element of flexibility enters into male identity: one can choose one's allegiances and the nature of one's investments. Freud would suggest that this involves the masculine 'renunciation of instinct':

An advance in intellectuality consists in deciding against direct sense-perception in favour of what are known as the higher intellectual processes – that is, memories, reflections and inferences. It consists, for instance, in deciding that paternity is more important than maternity, although it cannot, like the latter, be established by the evidence of the senses, and that for that reason the child should bear his father's name and be his heir.⁴

Yet instinct is not so easily renounced. Paternity involves a strange mixture of freedom and obligation, of uncertainty and fixity; an awareness of natural instinct cuts across cultural formations. Any given social structure (but particularly a modern one) needs to police both the breeding and the sexuality of individuals;⁵ questions of reproduction and sexuality are always public matters, even though the feelings involved are to some degree individualistic. The pressures were particularly acute in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, where a long-standing tradition of individualism was in conflict with an increasingly centralized and unified state,⁶ and where older customary practices were challenged by newly unified and textualized ideologies. One of the major functions of poetry may be to express the problems of negotiating the interaction between self and world in this case, giving meaning to individual desires within publicly negotiated structures, whilst seeking to shape those structures in ways which may better accommodate the individual's desires. Various factors made this agenda seem particularly urgent in the period under consideration: a woman on the throne challenging normative ideas about relations between the sexes; competing religious and scientific ideas about generation; a greater consciousness of social mobility; and the rise of a semi-professional idea of authorship. All this meant that poets had to reflect deeply on their own masculinity, seeing that its foundations were changeable or even non-existent.

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Anthony Fletcher's account of Renaissance notions of gender gives important reasons for masculinity being anxious and dependent:

Their belief in the mingling of [a woman's] seed with their own in the womb made it impossible for men to think of themselves as wholly gendered male beings until they had struggled free of maternal making and maternal influence. Thus the legacy of the Galenic heritage was the notion of human singleness being achieved out of inherent doubleness. Men found their manhood through their sexual potency and through the act which started the same cycle of twinship and doubleness all over again.⁷

We might infer from this, however, that no notion of *essential* masculinity was available, and that masculinity was all process with no final result. This will not quite do: a male God, the ultimate sacred Father, and His representatives on earth, particularly kings and familial fathers, but also perhaps priests and educators, constituted, at least notionally, a dwelling place for the idea of the father – the sacred name of the father is therefore not merely to be treated as an object of conventional reverence, but as a guarantee of the full masculinity which is never quite realized in an individual's life.

In many societies, to become a father is to become a man in the full sense, but that full masculinity is challenged in a number of ways, not least by women. To be a man in most pre-feminist societies is to *identify* with the paternal line; the classic misogynistic trope attacking the proverbial mutability of women surely reflects male anxiety about women's ability to interfere with this straightforward line, on the one hand by introducing the radical uncertainty of paternity, and on the other by *altering* a man's sons – both in carrying and in nurturing them – so that the son is not an identical copy of the father. As Sir Walter Raleigh put it in his *Instructions to His Sonne*, 'Wives were ordayned to continue the generation of men, to transferre them, and diminish them, eyther in countenance, or abilitie'.⁸ Women are necessary, but regarded as apt to translate men into diminished forms. Denials of women's contribution to offspring (based on Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*), making women out to be mere seedbeds for the transmission of masculinity, constitute an attempt to still this anxiety, and to pretend that masculinity is primary when there is a real suspicion that it is secondary. There is no doubt that much of the anxiety we see expressed in these poets is chauvinistic if not misogynistic; yet there are many varieties of sexism involved, some of which involve an awareness of their own absurdity and weakness, and many of which are rooted in more complex anxieties than mere prejudice against women.⁹

Nature itself (or herself) could come in for some criticism. In Fletcher and Field's *The Honest Man's Fortune* (c. 1613), Lady Orleans, suspected of infidelity by her paranoid husband, articulates an understandable female desire for men's sense of feminine mystery to be dispelled:

O Heaven, how gracious had Creation been
 To women, who are borne without defence,
 If to our hearts there had been doores through with
 Our husbands might have lookt into our thoughts,
 And made themselves undoubtfull. (I. ii. 21–5)¹⁰

By contrast, in the anonymous *Swetnam, the Woman Hater* (1620), the titular misogynist (aka Misogynos) argues

Happy were man, had woman neuer bin.
 Why did not Nature infuse the gift of Procreation
 In man alone, without the helpe of woman,
 Euen as we see one seed, produce another? (B2¹)

Though this character is the play's villain, and though his misogyny will be confuted by the play's conclusion, his position is merely an extreme version of the anxieties expressed in more normative discourse.

It has often been noted that Elizabethan poets appropriate images of pregnancy to depict their own creativity, but there has been some debate about the reasons for this.¹¹ Katharine Eisaman Maus postulates that it may simply be because 'men envy women's ability to give birth', but thinks this insufficient given the Renaissance tendency to denigrate maternity.¹² The more profound reason, for Maus, may be that men want to appropriate some of the mysteriousness of femininity, and specifically of the womb.¹³ Elizabeth D. Harvey similarly sees the appropriation of femininity as enabling writing but at the same time as making the writers appear helpless.¹⁴ Men in all cultures may envy the certainty of female creativity, and though it would be glib to suggest that this impels male artistic creation, an awareness of this aspect of the artist's motivation is quite commonplace (it goes back at least as far as Plato); when such an awareness is allied with an active cultural disparagement of motherhood, the most thoughtful poets may have to respond by acknowledging the anxieties that lie behind the assertions of masculine primacy. When patriarchal manliness is taken as too absolute a value, the threats to it become all the more troubling, particularly if it is recognized as being founded on fictions; yet this frees poets up to create their own fictions – hoping to improve on the official ones.

Whilst it is certainly true that reproductive sexuality was the cultural norm in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, it was by no means

an unproblematic norm. Although the patriarchal nuclear family was increasingly valorized in the Elizabethan era, it was challenged by a number of factors. Firstly an ideology of masculine friendship as the highest form of love made the family secondary.¹⁵ Yet ‘homosocial’ attempts to exclude women from the father–son bond which is taken to be the fundamental basis of society are even more doomed than similar attempts to exclude women from amicable male society in an exaggerated ideal of friendship.¹⁶ The patriarchal and the homosocial are bound together, but are equally unrealizable ideals. It is the fact that both are *unnatural* that creates a genuine sense of confusion in the Renaissance period. The male line ‘ought’ to be central and primary, but many men can see that it is really secondary and culturally formed.

A second major challenge came from the anomalous position of the female monarch. The family had to be validated from on high by a woman who had no family at all.¹⁷ These factors in some ways marginalize the heterosexual, patriarchal family – and one might even argue that this marginalization contributed to a developing private sphere of the nuclear family. It is important to avoid imposing a modern dichotomy of public and private onto a period in which there was no such sharp dichotomy,¹⁸ but equally it is important to be aware that there was *some* distinction between the spheres, and a consciousness that it was growing. The decline of larger kinship and clientage structures, along with the emergence of the machinery of the modern nation state, meant that people were increasingly beginning to see their loyalties in terms of a division between nation and family, with less intermediate institutions blurring the lines.¹⁹ It is not surprising then that ‘natural’ familial urges become confused in this period; in fact, one could argue that monogamous procreative marriage is as confused a category as Foucault famously argued that sodomy is.²⁰

Protestant ideology also had complex effects. Mary Beth Rose argues that

Although Protestant sexual discourse retains much of the erotic skepticism of the dualistic sensibility, it nevertheless unites love with marriage and conceives of marriage with great respect as the foundation of an ordered society. Protestant discourse is not dualistic, but complex and multifaceted, and one of its most significant and far-reaching changes is a shift in the prestige and centrality granted to the institution of marriage.²¹

These ideas of marriage may not have been new, but as Rose shows, they were more generally disseminated in Elizabethan England than they had been before. She also challenges Arthur Marotti’s notion that discourses on love are primarily a way of presenting other discontents: ‘whatever else

it may be, love, definitely, is love.²² One of my central enquiries here is to what extent love is sex – that is, to what extent poetic discussions of love are preoccupied by sexual generation, and how far anxieties about sex and childbirth inform poets' attitudes to their art, and their sense of its significance in the public realm. Both sex and poetry are ways of guaranteeing the continuity of the self, preventing isolation in the here and now, and giving one an afterlife in the future, but both are also uncertain endeavours.

The major stream of paternal imagery in Elizabethan verse begins with Philip Sidney, whose hugely influential sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* commences with the struggles of male poetic parturition:

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
 That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
 Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
 Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine,
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn'd braine.
 But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
 Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Studie's blowes,
 And others' feete still seemed but strangers in my way.
 Thus great with child to speak, and helplesse in my throwes,
 Biting my trewand pen, beating myself for spite,
 'Fool', said my muse to me; 'look in thy heart, and write.'²³

The tension between nature and art is deeply woven into the texture of the poem: from the initial pun on *fain* (wanting to, or feigning to), through the structural irony of such highly wrought rhetoric being used for the purposes of supposedly simple, true love, and the pen which is *truant* or *true-ant* (truth-making?) to the final pun on *art/heart*, Sidney continuously expresses the self-confounding secondariness of masculine self-expression. Though the idea of the poet as father to his words does not emerge until the sestet, it is suggested at the end of the octave, where the idea of being 'fruitful' prompts us to think of the ways in which an individual can come to fruition. The ways in which he may do so are many, and are at the centre of this book's concern: he may mature, and this will involve giving fruition to his own father as well as himself; he may win the woman, and thus not only gratify himself but also beget children of his own; he may gain other kinds of grace than female favour – godly and royal; he may achieve things in the public world; finally, he may make a

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poem that lasts. Yet the idea of fruition is not only complex in its results, but problematic as a process: however much one may want it to be a matter of hard work and study, it may also involve an element of passivity. Just like a fruit, one cannot force it: external influences must bring it steadily to ripeness (which is ‘all’ according to Edgar in *King Lear* (v. ii. 11)); those influences are experienced as female – the Queen, Nature, the beloved, the Muse – and they, paradoxically, make the process of masculine self-making feel feminine, like the apparently passive suffering of childbirth. The process of becoming fully masculine involves dealing with the feminine in ways that can fundamentally undermine one’s sense of masculinity.

For this reason, hermaphroditism is a powerful notion, allowing accommodations to be made between the sexes. The common Galenic model of sex-difference considered the body as flexible; able, through the influence of the humours, to acquire characteristics of either sex, femininity being the basic condition, and masculinity being something one had to strive for.²⁴ This model sat side-by-side with an idea that masculinity and femininity (as abstractions, at least) were fundamentally different, but the hows and whys of that difference required much rhetorical fancy footwork, as in Donne’s ‘Air and Angels’. In some ways, it was masculinity that was more the abstraction (being that which needed to be *added*), femininity being associated with Nature, the body and the material world. Any accommodation between the sexes, then, would have to be figured in a hermaphroditic manner. If offspring were a mixture of masculine and feminine, then so might be poems; for some poets that might even be a desirable result, allowing some redemption of condemned or repressed feminine elements in themselves. Mostly, however, poems are presented as male (though romances and translations might be considered as female, for reasons of genre and reflecting a sense of secondariness respectively). The ideal essence of the original poem is conceived as primarily masculine, but sometimes with feminine characteristics (such as mutability) that may enable a redemption of both sexes, or even a redemption of the anxieties created by sex-difference and masculine secondariness. For many poets, then, one of the major points of amatory verse is to negotiate better relations between the sexes and therefore between the masculine and feminine aspects of themselves.

All this said, conceiving of literary work in paternal terms is usually intended as a mode of authorial assertion. The dedication of the printed text of Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607, pub. 1613) is unusual in deploying the paternal conceit on behalf of a play. The publisher

Walter Burre writes, to Robert Keysar, manager of the Children of the Queen's Revels:

Sir,

This unfortunate child, who in eight days (as lately I have learned) was begot and born, soon after was by his parents (perhaps because he was so unlike his brethren) exposed to the wide world, who for want of judgement, or not understanding the privy mark of irony about it (which showed it was no offspring of any vulgar brain) utterly rejected it; so that for want of acceptance it was even ready to give up the ghost, and was in danger to have been smothered in perpetual oblivion, if you (out of your direct antipathy to ingratitude) had not been moved to relieve and cherish it, wherein I must needs commend both your judgement, understanding, and singular love to good wits. You afterwards sent it to me, yet being an infant and somewhat ragged, I have fostered it privately in my bosom these two years, and now to show my love return it to you, clad in good lasting clothes, which scarcely memory will wear out, and able to speak for itself; and withal, as it telleth me, desirous to try his fortune in the world, where if yet it be welcome, father, foster-father, nurse and child, all have their desired end. If it be slighted or traduced, it hopes his father will beget him a younger brother, who shall revenge his quarrel, and challenge the world either of fond and merely literal or illiterate misprision.²⁵

There may be several reasons for this: the play is an exceedingly unusual one, and had been a theatrical flop, and the printing is clearly an attempt not so much to cash in on a stage reputation as to find a different kind of audience in print, so that the paternal metaphor is used to assert the play's status as a theatrical poem; Beaumont also was a man of considerably higher social status than most playwrights, and the paternal metaphor may be a way of endowing the play with some of this status. Despite the play being published anonymously, as if it were a noble foundling, Beaumont, who would be buried in Westminster Abbey near Chaucer and Spenser (in what would become Poets' Corner), is made into a theatrical poet by the publisher's gesture: the paternal metaphor insists on both familial and poetic status and gives a sense of inherent social and aesthetic value to a man's works.

A play of the same year, Edward Sharpham's *Cupid's Whirligig*, also has a dedication using the paternal metaphor, the author telling his 'friend' Robert Hayman

I aime at you rather then the Reader, because since our trauailes I haue been pregnant with desire to bring foorth something whereunto you may be witnesse [a rather low-church term for godfather], and now being brought a bed if you please to be Godfather, I doubt not but this childe shal be wel maintained, seeing hee cannot liue aboute an houre with you, and therefore shall intreat you, when he is dead, he may be buried deepe enough in your good opinion, and he shall deserue this Epitaph:

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Heere lies the Childe, who was borne in mirth,
 against the strict rules of all Childe-birth:
 and to be quit, I gaue him to my friend,
 Who laught him to death, and that was his end.²⁶

As the play centres on a man who castrates himself in order to test his wife's chastity, the theme of paternity is rather grotesquely appropriate. An end to paternity and therefore to masculinity may be treated comically in the play, but to be laughed to death for a failure of one's masculine creativity is a deep fear for many Renaissance writers – there is a risk of humiliation in publication which might be considered a kind of emasculation.

Paternal imagery is perhaps most commonly to be found in dedications and prefaces, where it frames the work and relates it to its author, often in rather ironic ways. When Sidney calls the *Arcadia* 'this child I am loath to father',²⁷ it is not just a modesty formula or an instance of a courtier's reluctance to see his work in print (he was writing the dedication for a manuscript, after all), but rather a mark of the way in which *fathering* can mean acknowledging as one's own, or even as a part of one's self. His paternal reluctance may be as unaffectionate as the behaviour of the prime father in the text, Euarchus, who sentences his son to death, but it shows how much of a commitment fathering a text might be. Spenser's dedication of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) to Sidney is still more complex; he does not address Sidney, but the book itself, presenting it as a child going out to be fostered:

TO HIS BOOKE.
*Goe little booke: thy selfe present,
 As child whose parent is vnkent:
 To him that is the president
 Of noblesse and of cheualree,
 And if that Enuie barke at thee,
 As sure it will, for succoure flee
 Vnder the shadow of his wing,
 And asked, who thee forth did bring,
 A shepheard's swaine saye did thee sing,
 All as his straying flocke he fedde:
 And when his honor has thee redde,
 Crave pardon for my hardyhedde.
 But if that any aske thy name,
 Say thou wert base begot with blame:
 For thy thereof thou takest shame.
 And when thou art past ieopardie,
 Come tell me, what was sayd of mee:
 And I will send more after thee.
 Immeritô.²⁸*

The book is accorded a self and therefore an ability to act as well as speak in the world: it can move about in the world and, like Jonson's poem on his son, it can be 'asked' about its origins. Those origins are 'base' for a number of reasons: the passage reflects Spenser's sense of his own lowly status (though given his desire to be connected with the Spencers of Althorp this may be modesty); it is also a literary modesty formula refusing to boast of his poem's worth; it is linked to the supposed lowness of pastoral on the hierarchy of genres, and the social lowness of the shepherds central to that genre; finally, it reflects Spenser's decision to remain anonymous, thus in a sense bastardizing his poem. His preoccupation with foundlings in the later *Faerie Queene* would develop from this, suggesting that one needs to form one's own identity in a way we would call meritocratic, before one's paternity can be acknowledged. Despite later becoming a publicly acknowledged poet (and implicitly acknowledging *The Shepheardes Calender* in the opening lines of *The Faerie Queene*), Spenser would never put his name to the *Calender*, even in the five later editions published in his lifetime.²⁹ This may be because, having dedicated the work to Sidney, he no longer considered it his own. Poems, considered as children, take on a life of their own, and find their own way in the world like sons; yet the father's very anxiety about them suggests how much of themselves is at stake.

The circulation of poems in manuscript and the inevitable distortions this produced made it clear to authors that they were not in total control of their works any more than they could be in total control of their offspring; that uncertain model of reproduction even carried over into print, where an author had little control once he had handed over his text (or had it handed over – sometimes against his will).³⁰ The author's sense of investment in his text therefore, it may seem paradoxically, goes hand-in-hand with a need to be phlegmatic about others' appropriations of one's text. The idea of paternity allows poets to express their ambivalent feelings about this state of affairs, and contributes to the need to play with voice: the text itself must be imagined as its own speaker, even as it channels the poet's own voice.³¹ This is mainly an issue for the Elizabethans and Jacobean, fading as James's reign goes on: as Jonson professionalizes authorship, making it a more secure alternative to paternal immortality, he does away with some of the anxieties associated with letting one's poems go out into the world, reducing the metaphoric power of natural or artistic generativity, and thus of the investments poets make in it. The very confidence of his own voice militates against the tensions we find in earlier poets.