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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In his *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey retails an amusing anecdote whose truth is less important than what it reveals about the tensions between fathers and sons in Shakespeare's times:

Sir Walter Raleigh being invited to dinner with some great person, where his son was to goe with him; He sayd to his son, 'Thou art expected to stay at dinner, to goe along with me; but thou art [so] engaging in quarrels that I am ashamed to have such a Beare in my Company'. Mr Walter humbeld himself to his Father and promised he would behave himselfe mighty mannerly: so away they went . . . he sate next to his Father, and was very demure at least halfe Dinner time: Then, sayd he, 'I this morning, not having the feare of God before my eies, but by the instigation of the devill, went to a Whore; I was very eager of her, kissed and embraced her, and went to enjoy her, but she *thrust* me from her, and vowed I should not, "for your father lay with me but an hower ago"'. Sir Walter being strangely supprized, and putt out of countenance at so great Table, gives his son a damned blow over the face; his son, as rude as he was would not strike his father, but strikes over the face of the Gentleman that sate next to him, and sayd, '*Box about, 'twill come to my father anon*'. 'Tis now a common used proverb.¹

Although there is something of the jest-book here, the tale is significant: the son feels that there is a definite barrier to any actions against his father, whose person is really thought of as sacred, but still needs to assert himself; there is no question of who the joke is on – the son will ultimately displace his father, and the taboo of filial aggression is got round with relative ease. Raleigh's sense of his own dignity as being dependent on his son's actions makes him vulnerable to insult and loss of status, whereas his son is relatively protected. The father–son rivalry over a whore is a distillation of larger tensions based on the son and the father being strangely invested in one another. This investment or identification is more than a matter of Oedipal tensions: it seems to be driven by larger forces such as the devil which Walter Junior (a.k.a. Wat) mentions, which are beyond the ken of the individuals involved. There

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is something deeply problematic in the paternal relation, something rich and strange which is a bizarre mixture of the demonic and the sacred. The relationship, which ought to be a proper performance of dignity at the great man's table, becomes a farcical knockabout into which the son's bearish nature surprisingly intrudes; yet the father is no more dignified – he too is lustful, and driven by the demonic (his blow is a damned one, after all). It is a moment of revelation and recognition, as the private relationship becomes public.

There was a more clearly tragic sequel to this comic moment, in that young Wat was killed on the Orinoco river, having disobeyed his king and his father in attacking a Spanish station, an action that ultimately led to Raleigh senior's own execution. The story distils both the comic elements of paternity and the tragic possibilities that are implicit in them. The graceful loops – boxing about the table, as it were – of comedy and the stifling hyperidentifications of tragedy both rely on the sacredness of fathers, a factor that this book contends is central to the power of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In comedy, a whole community can be brought in to diffuse the tensions between the generations (in romance, supernatural forces may also intervene); yet diffusing the tension does not defuse it: it is spread into the atmosphere of such plays, leaving a sense of uneasy compromise. In tragedy, the need for sons and fathers to invest their sense of identity in one another leads to competitions that cannot be resolved. Only in history plays can there be a sense of secure continuity, but there it comes at a considerable cost to individuals.

Fathers are paradoxical figures on the English Renaissance stage. Being a father was in some sense a precondition for full masculine selfhood; yet once a man has reproduced, his subjectivity and scope for action usually seem to be attenuated in literary representations, which have a tendency to estrange the father, both from his offspring and from himself, for he possesses a dignity that he cannot quite own. The attenuation of selfhood is managed in different ways in different periods and genres of the drama; it not only makes for great dramatic movements, but demonstrates that there is no monolithic notion of patriarchy in the period. The father is divided between his private, emotional self, and his public, sacred role, and different kinds of dramatic plot attempt to unify that self, with varying degrees of success and failure.

Four major phases of the dramatic representation of fathers can be identified. In early Elizabethan drama, fathers are presented, with considerable nostalgia, as figures of restraint, or 'stays' – a key word in *Gorboduc* – but this also leads to them being tragically impotent figures; when they act

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they usually precipitate disaster or humiliation; this phase culminates in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where a father finally finds a mode of legitimate (though anguished) action. In the drama of the 1590s, the representation becomes more complex: excessive reverence and father–son identification starts to seem grotesque, leading to absurd tensions in comedy and ultimately to stifling impasses in tragedy; such plays are full of moments and scenes of excruciating paralysis, culminating in *Hamlet*. After *Hamlet*, drama starts to press at the limits of the father–child bond, in plays like *King Lear*, but plays of this period, including prodigal-son comedies and emergent tragicomedy, start to find ways of limiting, effacing, or even purging the power of the father; this is based, I think, on a half-stated sense of uncertain paternity, an issue that is generally ignored (or repressed) in Elizabethan drama; this phase reaches its greatest heights in *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, and culminates in the hard-won but gracious acceptance of uncertainty and limitation in *The Tempest*. That uncertainty becomes more explicit in later Jacobean plays, particularly in the tragicomedies that follow *The Tempest*: the new dominance of the tragicomic mode involves a gradual and often grudging acceptance of the limitations of paternal authority, and a concomitant need to find new sources of authority and identity, crucially founding selfhood in ideas of honour and virtue that are detached from mere *nature*. This acceptance is one of the keynotes of the last phase I deal with, later Jacobean drama, where fathers gradually withdraw from importance, setting the stage (as it were) for Caroline and Restoration drama's increasing indifference to fathers. The drama of this period tries to disentangle the private/emotional and the public/sacred roles of fathers, but in doing so it ultimately emphasizes the destructive tendencies of patriarchal ideas. Social and political change often underlies the changes in the drama, but the development of dramatic genres also has its own logic, frequently anticipating rather than reacting to political events.

Judith Haber has demonstrated that the idea of patrilineality is frequently invoked in drama as a way to introduce the causal and teleological elements of dramatic narrative and history, pushing aside tendencies to 'pointless play' that frequently emerge in drama's more lyric moments.² However, strange loops of dramatic structure and human emotion emerge even when causality and teleology seem most urgently in place. Even as ends are invoked by the prioritizing of paternal roles, so are limits and impasses which require drastic inventiveness on the part of dramatists and their characters. This inventiveness gives rise to the most striking instances of 'the vertiginous dramatic moment' (to adopt Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern's phrase),³ such as Edgar in *King Lear* leading his

blind father to an imaginary cliff. Here we find something different from Haber's pointless play, but something which is equally subversive of normative structures. Hence one has to quarrel with Stephen Greenblatt's view that identity in the Renaissance is less 'a final goal than . . . a way station on the road to a firm and decisive identification with normative structures';⁴ such a decisive identification is never quite managed, and always needs the mediation of another individual, who may well seem more important than the normative structures he represents. Fred Tromly's recent work on fathers in Shakespeare shows how a son's potential aggression against his father may be resolved through the idea of rescuing him;⁵ the individual is always more important than the structural.

It is certainly true, as Lisa Jardine has demonstrated, that the representation of gender relations on the stage reflects 'the patriarchy's unexpressed worry about the great social changes which characterize the period', particularly worries about women subverting lines of male inheritance.⁶ Yet that worry is projected at least as much onto the representation of fathers as onto unruly women, and fathers take on an emotional ambiguity whose richness derives from more than merely materialistic concerns. The present study should serve to complicate Linda Bamber's view (in what is otherwise perhaps the subtlest account of Shakespeare's gender politics) that 'For Shakespeare the issue of the feminine is much more problematic than the issue of the father.'⁷ Masculinity, for Shakespeare and other dramatists, is an ideal whose power derives at least in part from its unattainability;⁸ the ideal of the father is perhaps the most acute instance of this. Peter Erickson shows that, while men tend to prop up one another's identity in drama, there is a developing need, which seems to increase over the course of Shakespeare's career, 'towards a possible accommodation with women', particularly in their roles as mothers.⁹ That accommodation goes hand in hand with an increasing sense of fathers as a problem. Catherine Belsey has described 'the incursion of anarchy, cruelty and death into what is legal, affectionate and life-giving' in Shakespearean family life.¹⁰ Yet we shall see that cruelty and affection tend to be deeply linked in the drama's developing sense of human possibilities. The precariousness of manly honour in the period means that it can hardly be otherwise,¹¹ and fathers most acutely embody this problem.

Fathers are crucial figures in the process of dramatic recognition, a process which is not as teleological as it might initially seem. The father being, in a very vivid sense, a sacred figure at this time, this means that any action on his part may imperil the whole system of sacred order. However, being sacred also makes a figure taboo – and taboos are

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wonderful resources for drama. They put limits on action, and thereby give structure. Fathers therefore enable a large variety of tense dramatic set-pieces, most of which involve kinds of recognition – Aristotle’s pivotal moment of dramatic intensity and release (*anagnorisis*).¹² Recognizing the father is particularly powerful, as it is an affirmation of the deepest ideas of identity available at the time. Yet recognitions are also a very eerie and controversial feature of drama.

As Northrop Frye puts it, in both tragedy and comedy ‘what is recognized is seldom anything new; it is something which has been there all along, and which, by its reappearance or manifestation, brings the end into line with the beginning’.¹³ It is clear that a father is a perfect instance of this in Renaissance drama (for the Greeks, the appearance of a god might be better). What happens in moments of recognition is a crystallization of identity that is deeply paradoxical: on the one hand, that crystallization is momentary and contingent, destined to be swept away by the larger progress and process of drama; on the other, it constitutes an epiphanic glance into eternity, the realm of sacred continuity. There is a tension between the illusion of completeness that *anagnorisis* brings, and our knowledge of limitation.¹⁴ To put it another way, recognition is an impermanent recognition of permanence.

It is clear that *anagnorisis*/recognition is a crucial aspect of aesthetic experience as well as being an essential cognitive pleasure, but its role in tragedy in particular is harder to explain.¹⁵ We enjoy seeing someone move from ignorance to knowledge partly because we have generally anticipated that movement, and can feel superior;¹⁶ in the best detective fiction, we often guess the solution *just* before its revelation, so that our pleasure is one of confirmation rather than real discovery;¹⁷ this effect may help to confirm for us the coherence of the fictional world and therefore even the existence of the external world. The representation of recognition also affirms for us the continuity of the fictional character who does the recognizing;¹⁸ though the previous ignorance of that character indicates the limitation of human knowledge, the recognition prioritizes knowledge and continuity, and suggests that the connection of two points in an individual’s life is enough for our faith in continuous selfhood to be justified. The fact that we ground our belief in the existence of other minds on such moments is hugely significant: the movement from ignorance to knowledge (what developmental psychologists call ‘theory of mind’) is in some sense proof of our own humanity as much as proof of fictional characters’ reality, because we may have faint recollections of our own development from infantile solipsism to acceptance of other people’s

different understanding of the world.¹⁹ Perhaps this is why recognition of other people is always more striking than recognition of things and facts; but perhaps this is also why it is coloured with something tragic: even as we recognize someone else, in doing so we recognize that they are fundamentally inaccessible.²⁰ Even when we encounter recognition in comedy, it is more likely to be coloured with sadness than with real joy: people bring together the burdens of their sufferings, yet at the same time realize the incommensurability of those burdens.²¹ Recognition of a father is, furthermore, apt to be a primal instance of this: if there is something symbiotic about the mother–child bond,²² the father is apt to be the first true ‘third person’ in human experience. He is therefore the symbol of all that is unknowable even as he is also the symbol of knowledge; he can only be an object of sympathy, never of empathy, and yet the ideology of a patrilineal society asks boys at least to identify with their fathers, while demanding respect for them which might preclude sympathy. This may be the essence of the tragic double bind.

There may be several ways of cutting this knot in Renaissance England, all of them rather magical: the first is a simple faith in names, the superstitious belief that similarity of name ultimately allows real identification, and so naming becomes a key aspect of recognition; the second is the act of revenge, which constitutes proof of one’s relation to the patrilineal family; the third is the idea of the paternal blessing, which is the one remaining licensed ceremonial magic in the family;²³ indeed, the ideal father is perhaps most powerfully felt in moments of paternal blessing. By this means, acknowledgement (one of the other meanings of *anagnorisis*) gets the performance it requires – it cannot be merely internal.²⁴

Of course, this is a major feature of Biblical portrayals of patrilineal identity (most notably in the story of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau), but it seems to have acquired new meaning and force in Renaissance England. Indeed, the idea of the blessing seems to have gained in importance, being mentioned more frequently in drama, and often treated as the paradigm of earthly bliss – e.g. in Fletcher’s *The Pilgrim* (c. 1620), where a state of contentment is compared to ‘the blessing of a father’ (II. ii. 325).²⁵ The emphasis on paternal blessings may have to do with protestantism’s abandonment of intercessory saints, making fathers into the only source of connection to the divine.²⁶

Freud’s myth (one might call it a just-so story) of a band of brothers ganging up to kill their father is highly suggestive, if deeply speculative. For Freud, this moment is the origin of totemism and taboos, and ultimately

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of all religion.²⁷ The inability of any one son to embody the murdered father necessitates the creation of an ideal father who will be a patriarchal god.²⁸ The whole myth relies on an idea of collective repression, though, and is therefore completely unverifiable; nor does it really help explain particular social constructions of the idea of the father and the idea of patricide. It is also highly speculative, of course, for me to suggest that the Reformation brought about a comparable sense of guilt at killing a primal father, at rejecting the authority of the Pope, or even of God Himself. If nothing else, the Reformation certainly increased the value of individual fathers, perhaps making them *too* important, making them bearers of a range of value and meaning that they could not in everyday life sustain.²⁹ This must have contributed to a greater level of ambivalence about fathers (Freud's key point), and a sense of fragmentation between ideal and reality that drama could work through.

The taboo status of fathers can be most clearly seen when the taboos involved come close to being broken. In Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humour*, Sogliardo says that he will not trust his heirs to build his grand tomb; Carlo Buffone pretends to assent to his position, saying 'heirs and executors, are growne damnably carelesse, specially, since the ghosts of testators left walking' (II. i. 77–9).³⁰ The joke reflects an important reality: since the protestant abolition of Purgatory, the place from which ghosts could explicably return, there is no way for the dead to pressurize their sons and other heirs. The fear that one's children will not respect one's wishes after death, and that they will rejoice in one's death, becomes a dramatic commonplace. In a play celebrating charitable deeds, *If You Know Not Me*, this motivates charitable actions during life, Hobson saying 'Heaven grant that I may liue, that, when I die, / Although my children laugh, the poor may cry' (I: 278).³¹ Increasingly in the early seventeenth century, characters in plays repeat the idea of sons rejoicing at their fathers' deaths as if this were becoming a paradoxical proverb: in Middleton's *The Puritan Widow* (1606), for example, a play which opens with some allusions to *Hamlet*, the bereaved son is very different from the Danish prince, saying 'I protest I am glad he's churched, for now he's gone I may spend in quiet', and 'a fair riddance. My father's laid in dust. His coffin and he is like a whole meat pie, and the worms will cut him up shortly' (I. i. 48–9, 136–8), and the idea of laughing at a father's death is repeated later in the play by other characters (III. v. 92–4, IV. i. 19–20).³² Similarly, in *Your Five Gallants* (1607), Middleton has his hero Fitzgrave ask the titular rogues 'Are your fathers dead, gentlemen, you're so merry?' (IV. vii. 246–7). Taboo-breaking gives way to commonplace comedy with only the mildest shock value.

Yet the taboos associated with fathers never entirely lose their force. In the depths of misfortune, people may curse their nurses, their homelands, their mothers, and even their parents in the plural, but they seem never to curse their fathers specifically. And they very rarely kill their fathers, as we shall see. Nonetheless, fathers tend to be treated as objects or ideals rather than as subjects in themselves. Coppélia Kahn argues that Shakespeare's 'male characters are engaged in a continuous struggle, first to form a masculine identity, then to be secure and productive in it'.³³ Yet it is actually rare for any father to be productive: their selves seem *achieved*, and the priority of security – of preserving the peak of *being* that they have arrived at – seems much greater.³⁴ Rather like a woman preserving her chastity, a father seems only able to preserve his sense of honour,³⁵ and this can make his position as precarious as a virgin in the woods. In reality, it seems that many men searched for other forms of self-realization as an alternative to the family,³⁶ but in drama the familial seems primary. We must be wary of attributing too much anxiety to the condition of patriarchal masculinity in the period,³⁷ but the fact that the position of the patriarch was so important – even central – to the culture of the time means that a great deal of dramatic energy goes into protecting it. This makes the position of fathers crucial to our understanding of dramatic form.

Something similar is at work in Greek drama, but the differences are as revealing as the similarities.³⁸ In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Orestes is pardoned for matricide on the basis that avenging his father takes absolute priority: Apollo, who had ordered the vengeance, takes his authority from 'the power of the Father', Zeus, and says:

Here is the truth, I tell you – see how right I am.
The woman you call the mother of the child
is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,
the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.
The *man* is the source of life – the one who mounts.
She, like a stranger for a stranger, keeps the
the shoot alive unless god hurts the roots.³⁹

Yet despite the importance of fathers as motivating principles – Agamemnon must be avenged in *The Libation Bearers* and Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays – fathers are not treated with great respect in Greek tragedy, a contradiction that might subtly and indirectly inform Renaissance drama. Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* can abuse his abdicated grandfather Cadmus

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for his ridiculous Bacchic attire (lines 250–2); whereas in *Orestes* Electra expresses doubt as to whether her father Agamemnon was really glorious (line 17).⁴⁰ This may have something to do with the fact that in Greek myth one can have two fathers: Heracles, Theseus, and Helen, for example, have both human and divine fathers (and Heracles' human father in Euripides' play admits his own feebleness). Perhaps there is bound to be less pressure on the idea of paternity in a polytheistic, kin-based culture where the range of obligations is spread more broadly than in a monotheistic culture beginning to adopt nuclear familial patterns; yet some of that Greek doubleness of paternity may find its way onto the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Of course, fathers for the Greeks are figures to whom one is obliged in various ways. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Menelaus appeals to Agamemnon to make the sacrifice of his (Agamemnon's) titular daughter on the basis of their common paternity, but when he (ineffectually) changes his mind and decides that the girl shall live, his pity for his brother is based on their common maternity (lines 404, 501). This idea of the father as conferring obligation, the mother as bringing pity is shared by Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; but it does not share very strongly the idea of the cursed family which is so important in Greek tragedy and which there dissipates individual obligation to a father.

The greatest scenes of direct paternal pressure in Greek tragedy come in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. In the former case, Theseus falsely believes that his titular son has raped his wife (the boy's stepmother) Phaedra, and therefore curses the son; despite his rage, he does not kill his son himself (killing a son seems as unthinkable to the Greeks as patricide does to the playwrights of Shakespeare's day).⁴¹ In the latter, stranger, and more brilliant case, the dying Heracles makes huge, seemingly illegitimate demands on his son Hyllus, paradoxically insisting that their fulfilment will be proof of the son's legitimacy: the poisoned Heracles has Hyllus take him to a mountain-top and burn him up, and adds the further command that the boy must marry Iole, a woman he admits that he has himself slept with; in thus demanding both patricide and a kind of incest, Heracles is obliging a dutiful son to commit precisely the sins that were signs of a cursed unfilial nature in Oedipus. Rather than acting as the embodiment of the Law, the father here comes to represent the caprice of an utterly lawless nature; but this is because he is becoming a god. The gods can transcend human laws, it is clear (the play ends with a choric insistence that all that has gone wrong should be attributed to Heracles' father Zeus); like

Oedipus at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the figure of the sinful father gains a kind of apotheosis that transcends and purges human sinfulness. Rather than being models for emulation, these Greek hero-fathers are warnings, figures that go beyond human limits, men at whom we can merely wonder.⁴²

Perhaps one might conclude that fathers in Greek tragedy are rather taken as literary *exempla* than as people with deep human connections, the familial drama usually taking place in their absence: the absorption of this attitude, when put alongside Protestantism's ambivalent valorization of paternity and an increasingly humane sense of the relations between fathers and children, may account for the extraordinarily various pressures which emerge in the dramatic representation of fathers in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Greek tragedy, however indirectly and incompletely absorbed, created another model to which dramatic fathers had to rise.

Tragic catharsis – purgation – can be more than the removal of pity and fear: it can also involve the cleansing and recovery of women. In Euripides' *Helen*, for instance, the sins of the titular character are taken away as we learn that she was replaced by a phantom and that the Trojan War has been all for nothing; the latter aspect of this may be tragic, but Menelaus' recovery of a pure wife is a happier catharsis. The discovery that Iphigenia is not really dead in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is a similar cancelling-out of tragic causation;⁴³ as is the recovery of Alcestis in her eponymous play. These plays are the ultimate root of tragicomedy – but it is worth noting that the tragicomic norm is for women to be purified and recovered, not men. Hence Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* can recover his daughter, and even his wife, but cannot recover his son. The reason for this is, I think, based on an inversion of the sexual double standard: a woman, in a patriarchal society, can never recover her honour/virtue if she is unfaithful, whereas a man can (his honour/virtue being based on something more than sex). The unfairness of this double standard is obvious to us, but I think it was also half-consciously recognized in earlier ages, and the tragicomic purgation of women is a way around it; the strange corollary of this is that men cannot recover their honour in tragedy as they can in other genres. Our only response to them is pity and fear. The father is, as Apollo says, the one who mounts (in many senses), and that means that he is one who must always elude comprehension. In Renaissance drama, particularly of the early Jacobean period, the purgation of the father tends to lead to his erasure.