

The Infant's Bond with the Absent Mother in *King Lear*

This paper will treat Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a dream-play consisting of a sequence of linked dream-events in the mind of a baby during the process of weaning.¹ Certain dreamlike episodes in the play will be considered in which the self-deposed omnipotent king-baby, Lear, strives to establish internal analyst-figures who will help him make sense of his new relationship with his mother Cordelia. Cordelia has already said she loves him 'according to her bond', no more, no less. Indeed, her name indicates the idea of a bond, a cord, as well as that of a heart-warming liquid food, a cordial. What is the nature of this bond, this link, especially when she is out of sight, absent, sent over the sea to France with the husband who seems to have replaced the baby in her affections? What is the nature of the internal links that form during the mother's absence, repairing the bond in the sense of a new relationship?

It is notable that it is the baby, not the mother, who initiates the weaning process, and hopes that it will be pleasant and peaceful, an 'unburdened crawl towards death'. He has observed the reduction in breastmilk and converts this into a decision of his own. In organising Cordelia's banishment via his little game of dividing up his kingdom, he unconsciously ensures she links up with a husband who is capable of distinguishing inner worth from external, purely sensual seduction – France rather than Burgundy who says her 'price is fall'n' because she has lost her share of the kingdom. Her values are separated from those of the greedy, hypocritical, sensual sisters, Regan and Goneril. And in splitting his object into good and bad breasts (the good and bad daughters), the baby hopes to achieve a placid fulfilment in which his omnipotence is in effect not challenged.

Instead of course this relinquishment stirs pain, rage and terror, focused on the image of the flattened breast:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!...
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th' world! (III.ii.1-7)

This is the internal passionate storm of howling and weeping, which he feels breaks his heart into 'a hundred thousand flaws', a total disintegration, even to madness: 'O Fool! I shall go mad', he says to his constant companion, the 'fool' aspect of himself which is not bound by illusions of regal omnipotence, and whose nursery songs keep him in touch with reality even when they appear to be mad or absurd. The Fool is indeed the first link with the internal mother, the first intimate friend to appear after Cordelia has left, and is presented as notably attached to Cordelia.

The Fool warns Lear against confusing his heart with his 'toe' – the baby comforting himself excessively or omnipotently by toe or thumb sucking, only to wake in 'woe' and start crying when the illusion no longer satisfies:

¹ Paper given at IPA conference, 2021. See also a chapter in *Dream Sequences in Shakespeare*, 2021. Lisa Miller was the first to write about *King Lear* as a weaning story, in 'A View of *King Lear*', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 4 (1), 1975, pp. 93-124.

The man that makes his toe
What he his heart should make,
Shall of a corn cry woe,
And turn his sleep to wake. (II.ii.31-4)

The little toe-penis, like a 'shell'd peascod', has no 'house' for its 'head', just as his own mouth has no nipple to house; container and contained are separated, resulting in 'houseless heads and unfed sides' (III.iv.30). In this way Lear comes to terms with the fact that he is just a small child, a fool, playing bo-peep with his mother, his little penis no more 'prosperous' than Edmund's, and the consciousness of his own helplessness is the first step in self-knowledge.

Lear's internalised object needs to be expanded by incorporating new qualities, essentially those of strength, patience and philosophy. His understanding of his sense of helplessness is promoted by another guide, namely his old advisor and counsellor, Kent, whom he has rejected along with Cordelia. Kent represents an internal father-figure who has in the past been capable of moderating this passionate baby's tantrums: 'Come not between the Dragon and his wrath' (I.i.121) he says to Kent, this time rejecting his interventions and banishing him from the court. Kent then takes on the burden of Lear's rage and helplessness, when he provokes the false courtiers who surround the bad sisters, in the guise of civilisation, and insists that authentic feelings must take precedence over good manners. This results in Kent being punished by being put in the stocks overnight. He is immobilised like a baby within the bars of its cot. His paternal identification with 'dragon' Lear is pictured in his knocking down of Regan's servant (who represents hypocrisy); yet he is able to make constructive use of the physical confinement that ensues, when he draws from his pocket a letter from Cordelia and reads it by moonlight, thus extending the baby's imaginative capacity to endure his object's absence.

Kent: Approach, thou beacon to this under globe,
That by thy comfortable beams I may
Peruse this letter. ... I know 'tis from Cordelia,
Who hath most fortunately; been informed
Of my obscured course; and shall find time
From this enormous state, seeking to give
Losses their remedies. (II.iii.163-169)

This passage emphasises the role played by the adult-part, taking on the 'shame' and humiliation of being confined by the bad mother who restricts his expression of rage by subduing him in the 'stocks', in a darkened 'obscured course', where however he is put in mysterious contact with the good mother, Cordelia, who appears in memory like a sun whose 'comfortable beams' promise emotional 'remedies' to losses that are felt to be enormous. The adult-part is thus shown to be in touch with developmental forces that are working in the background on the baby's behalf, forging links outside the omnipotent control of his ego. This is by contrast with the 'hundred knights' of baby Lear's omnipotence, who are reduced by the harsh sister-breasts to no followers at all. They attempted to dominate the mother through loud bullying behaviour, screams and rages. Instead, with his internal analyst-figure in the stocks, bearing the humiliation on his behalf, the baby is being gradually orientated towards tolerating the depressive position.

This is the beginning of an oedipal phantasy of a reparative intercourse hovering in the background, outside his reach, on the horizon, just beyond the white cliffs of Dover where the white breast used to be. It is significant that this is established before the worse turmoil of the storm on the heath is undergone. This is the central dream-drama of the play, the crisis during which the baby is required to develop an internal philosopher as part of his own internal equip-

ment. This development takes place in the form of Mad Tom, the disguise which Edgar has been forced to take on behalf of both babies, Lear and his own father Gloucester, in order to sort out their confusion of values and enable them to proceed on their way beyond infancy. Owing to Kent's Christ-like suffering in the stocks, and the authenticity of feeling of the Fool, Lear makes contact with Edgar, who becomes recognised explicitly as his internal 'philosopher'.

Kent and the Fool are instrumental in helping the background communications that are worked through during the storm. They introduce Lear to his internal philosopher, Edgar, which constitutes a turning-point in the play and in the weaning process, the next stage in the evolution of his rapprochement with Cordelia. This is imaged in terms of the action, when the Fool comes upon a rickety shelter in the middle of the storm, and then rushes out again in fear at the strange 'spirit' he has discovered inside it, namely Mad Tom, a new internal object. This happens after Lear for the first time shows concern for his Fool, indicating a genuine depressive position:

Lear: How dost, my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow? (III.ii.67-68)

Edgar is in a sense the new, more sophisticated Fool. He has already been separated from his bad brother Edmund who is addicted to masturbatory phantasies that shore up his fragile ego (his belief in his own bastardy). Emotionally, the turn is a reversal of the baby's egocentricity, his belief that he is the only needy baby in the world. Instead, Lear becomes aware of the idea of 'unaccommodated man' as the universal condition of humanity with its need for there to be an egalitarian distribution of benefits (food, milk) 'so distribution shall undo excess/ And each man have enough'. He realises that his previous conception of his kingly role was founded upon greed, the desire to have everything about his mother for himself. Now he cannot regain his mother without acknowledging that he is not her only baby. Instead of rejecting her bond, her link with others, he strengthens it whilst paradoxically relinquishing his propriety over it.

It is for these reasons of equality, distribution, and fairness, that the central 'trial' in the storm is preoccupied with the theme of justice, in the midst of the emotional torments represented by biting fiends, dogs, faeces and poisons, all vividly and somatically real to the baby or small child, and experienced as punishment for his greed and bad feelings. The hovel represents the primitive beginnings of a container for knowledge. Then mysteriously, the little group find themselves in a farmhouse, representing a better quality state of mind in which to 'anatomise' the cruel aspects of the weaning mother in a rational manner. Inside, they conduct a judicial hearing. During this process Lear decides to stick close to Mad Tom, this 'learned Theban' or 'good Athenian'. It takes the form of a judicial hearing. 'What is the cause of thunder?' (faeces) Lear had asked Edgar (III.iv.159). Mad Tom, by poetic identification, understands what it feels like to be 'an Angler in the lake of Darkness', attacked by fiends with 'red burning spits' in the form of wind, wet and thunder – urine and faeces that penetrate the skin and are experienced as hellish punishments for the baby's evacuations. The 'foul fiend bites his back' too, and his refrain is 'Tom's' a-cold'.

Now, elevated from naked beggar to 'robed man of justice', Edgar says, 'Let us deal justly' (III.vi.37). The part of Goneril, in their little play-within-a-play, is represented by a 'joint-stool' and associated with forked fiends and faeces (stools). The poison is drawn out and modified; Edgar puts the baby's destructive feelings in perspective:

And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep shall take no harm. (III.vi.43-5)

Lear's 'minikin mouth' (and anus) with their 'blasts', are not as big and destructive as he fears. His attacking devils then modulate into more familiar or recognizable 'little dogs' with household names whom Tom chases away: 'Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs!' The fiendish quality of the cruel biting black nipple (Goneril) is transmuted into a more plaintive, almost nostalgic relation with these three 'little dogs' (daughters) who were once his friends – 'Sweetheart' being a synonym for 'Cordelia'. It is after this piece of analysis that Lear is able to adopt the voice of his internal mother to hush his baby-self to sleep:

Lear: Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains; so, so. We'll go to supper in the morning.

Fool: And I'll go to bed at noon. (III.vi.85-7)

These are the Fool's last words; after this, his role as nascent poet who can speak the truth of feeling is taken over fully by Edgar. He is now the passionately accepted adult part, the internal analyst, the guide who can convert the baby's feelings into thoughts during his dreams, and who leads him back to Cordelia, or rather forwards to a new relationship with his mother.

All this time, Cordelia has been 'over the bourne' in France with her new husband, a private space at a small distance from the England full of babies, connected however by imagination and identification. Here she has been in a state of reverie, while the baby has been learning to dream of a reparative intercourse beyond his omnipotent control.

This dream is facilitated, or even instigated, by Edgar. We remember that he serves, or belongs to, not just one baby but two: he is the true son of Gloucester, the other old man or baby whose story runs parallel to that of Lear. This baby is at a similar stage in development and his experience reinforces that of Lear, reminding us that the weaning process is in essence the same for babies of all kinds of disposition, whether fiery and tyrannical like Lear or soft and easy-going like Gloucester. Gloucester discovers the idea of a cruel sensuality later than Lear, resulting in his being blinded in order to learn to 'see feelingly'. This enforced awareness of cruelty results in the creation of a harsh combined object in his mind, in the form of an overpowering paternal superego and witch-mother, something which Edgar helps him to modulate and overcome when he leads him to the cliffs of Dover and describes for him the baby's-eye view of the dizzy heights of the treacherous mother's body. After he has rescued his father, by means of this poetic understanding, he leads him to the place at which he discovers 'ripeness is all'. At this point of achieved knowledge, he is ready to die, but from happiness at recognition of his son, the new self that will succeed him as his heart 'bursts smilingly'.

The cliffs of Dover were Gloucester's dream of weaning; they are the prologue to the same, but more complicated, weaning of Lear at the same place of maternal elevation. Lear's denouement takes longer but is also more thoughtful. It begins with his giving advice to his sibling baby about the new life confronting them:

Lear: We came crying hither:
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry... (IV.vi.180-2)

In advising Gloucester he is also realising for himself that their transition from breastfeeding babies to adults is in a sense a type of new birth, a new phase in their personality – the 'catastrophic change' of which Bion speaks in his model of development. The new life is, as always in poetry, seen as a type of death and rebirth. Here it images the transition from breastfeeding babies to adults in the sense of people who are no longer dependent on the external object but who have internalised their object. So when Lear is finally reunited with Cordelia, he does not

recognise her instantly but through a protracted process of discovery, including having to jettison his idealising phantasy of being able to live with her forever 'like birds in a cage', protected against the outside world. Ultimately however he acknowledges that this would be an illusion and that his development requires that the milk-mother must die, be hanged, her breast flat and floppy, imaged by the pieta-like picture of the old man with his daughter dead in his arms. His heart breaks, like Gloucester's, when he imagines that her spirit lives. It is not illusion but a new self-knowledge based on acceptance of joy and tears, love and hate together – aesthetic conflict, leading to catastrophic change, in Bion's developmental sense. The spirit of the new man takes shape in Edgar, who is the right man to be the new king, not because he wants power but because he does not want it. He represents the personality that has successfully worked through the weaning process and emerged into the true depressive position.