

When the Womb Heats Up, the Vapors Rise, & the Mother Suffocates: The Question of Lear's "Mother"

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ABSTRACT

In Act II, Scene iv, Lear conjures up the image of the "mother" to express his outburst of rage and physical sensations: "O! how this mother swells up toward my heart; /*Hysterica passio!* down, thou climbing sorrow! /Thy element's below" (54-56). As many critics have identified, this "mother" is another name for the womb, matrix, or uterus. The image of the "swelling mother" points to the disease called hysteria. Yet, what does the "mother" stand for? Who is responsible for the rise or swelling of Lear's "mother"? Does Lear experience some sort of gender confusion by conjuring up the "mother"? Or is Lear a male hysteric? One thing is certain that the swelling of the "mother" in Lear is overwhelmingly sophisticated. The obscure, restless, and out of place "mother" in Lear is not only the symptomatic focus of the play but also the locus from which we can reformulate our position and read the play anew. What concerns us most in this paper is the way the mother affects Lear and shapes his rite of passage into self-knowledge. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to explore the theme of hysteria, to trace the effects of the swelling of the "mother," and to analyze its multifarious manifestations in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In this paper, our approach to Lear's "mother" is topical, new historical, and feminist. We argue that the image of the "mother" provides us with a critical perspective to engage the patriarchal structure and examine gendered discourses and implications in the play. As a result, this paper, by re-reading *King Lear* in the name of the "mother," shows the working of the binary mechanism embedded

in Lear's patriarchal authority and self-fashioning.

KEY WORDS

Shakespeare, *King Lear*, hysteria, mother, womb, Edward Jorden, Samuel Harsnett, the feminine other, self-fashioning



In Renaissance England, hysteria and its kindred terms, such as “*furor uterinus*,” “the vapors,” and “the suffocation of the mother,” initiated an entirely new way of thinking, feeling, seeing, and imagining the disease. These disease titles, which are all related to the womb, were deployed to flesh out new medical theories as part of the new disease culture of the era.

The poet, according to Plato, is deemed a madman, possessed by transcendental fire (*furor*) or divine inspiration, which thrusts him out of himself. Thus, in the Middle Ages, when a woman was possessed by the uterine furor or fire, or when the womb heated up, it implied that she was beside herself, experiencing either maenadic madness or diabolic possession. In the Renaissance, the term “vapors” came into vogue, which denoted sharp, malign, noxious, and heated air ascending upwards in the body. When the vapors, due to menstrual blockage, imbalanced vaginal moisture, or the retention of putrescent “seed,”¹ etc., emanated from the afflicted, infuriated, and disordered womb, they floated upwards, caused the other parts of the body to suffer by “consent” or “sympathetic interaction,” and in the end made the latter partakers of uterine sensations.² In later usage, especially in the eighteenth century, “the vapors” became equated with hysteria. The term had become the image of the female hysterical passion, heightened sensitivity, and intense irritability.

Of all the symptoms of hysteria, one of the most prominent somatic manifestations was a choking sensation or suffocation. The choking sensation was known as the *globus hystericus*, called by Edward Jorden, an English physician in the Renaissance, “the suffocation of the mother.” In Renaissance England, medical interest in hysteria dates from Edward Jorden’s publication of *A Brieve Discourse*

of a Disease called the Suffocation of the Mother (1603). The title of the book suggests that the disease called the “mother” is often associated with the feeling of suffocation or strangulation caused by the rise of the vapors of the womb to the throat area. In addition to the disease titles mentioned above, hysteria proliferates under several other names. As Jordan writes, “This disease is called by diverse names amongst our Authors, *Passio Hysterica*, *Suffocatio*, *Prasfocatio*, and *Strangulatus uteri*, *Caducus matricis*, etc.” (5). In Jordan’s *Briefe Discourse*, “womb” and “mother” are interchangeable and share the same meaning to a greater extent than they do today.³ In fact, the mutual implication of “womb” and “mother” can be traced back to the ancient definition of hysteria found in the Hippocratic corpus.⁴ When the womb is called the mother, it implies a process of the hysterization or pathologization of women’s bodies and points to the suffocation of the mother. In Jordan’s treatise, the “mother” turns out to be a metonymy for the female malady hysteria *par excellence*, fully loaded with gendered implication at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Other than the theme of hysteria, the central focus of this paper is Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. This play has often been considered by many critics Shakespeare’s greatest achievement.⁵ Some even go further than this, and claim that the work is one of the greatest pieces of work in the entire realm of literature. But what is the greatness of the work? A. C. Bradley offers us a perceptive explanation: “There is nothing more noble and beautiful in literature than Shakespeare’s exposition of the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear’s nature” (24). F. David Hoeniger also expresses similar observations: “Nowhere else in Jacobean drama or the whole of English Renaissance literature is the emotional turmoil leading to madness presented with anything like the seriousness and understanding Shakespeare shows in *King Lear*” (307). In this paper, we argue that Shakespeare has Lear express the greatest human suffering and stormy emotion in the name of the “mother.” This “mother” in the end leads Lear to embark on the path of self-fashioning.

In *King Lear*, after Lear experiences all kinds of humiliation by Goneril, and finds his messenger Kent in the stocks, he conjures up the

image of the “mother” to express his outburst of rage and physical sensations:

O! how this mother swells up toward my heart;
Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow!
 Thy element's below.⁶ (II. iv. 54-56)

In the name of the “mother,” Lear’s stormy emotion is now accompanied by distressing sensations of his body. But what does the “mother” signify? Who is responsible for the rise or swelling of Lear’s “mother”? Why does Shakespeare have Lear in his moment of anguish cry out this image of hysteria? Why does he use one of hysteria’s most powerful images—the swelling womb rising to the heart and lodged in the throat—to convey one of the most intense scenes in *King Lear*? Is the “mother,” a disease of unbridled female sexuality, a poetic trope for Lear’s unbridled anger? What is the effect achieved by this trope of hysteria? Why is hysteria, among all other diseases, employed by Shakespeare, capable of giving expression to this unprecedented crisis in Lear’s life? Does Lear experience some sort of gender confusion by conjuring up the “mother”? Does it mean that the out-of-place Lear has become a hysterical woman? Has hysteria, “the daughter’s disease,” become some sort of “father’s illness” in Shakespeare’s hand? We may wonder what has Lear to do with the mother, since hysteria has always been etymologically linked with women and Lear’s anatomy is obviously not susceptible to such a disease.⁷ Why does Shakespeare choose the “mother” to convey Lear’s madness? Or is it a medical blunder to attribute Lear’s painful sensation to hysteria?

After posing all the thorny questions listed above, why do we still want to focus on this “mother” in *King Lear*? For us, the restless and out of place “mother” in Lear is not only the symptomatic focus of the play but also the site from which we can read the play anew. What concerns us most in this paper is the way the mother affects Lear and shapes his rite of passage to self-knowledge. In addition, the purpose of this paper is to explore the theme of hysteria, to trace the effects of the “swelling” of the “mother,” and to analyze its many manifestations in

Shakespeare's *King Lear*. All the more, the image of the "mother" provides us with a critical perspective to engage the patriarchal structure in the play. This paper, thus, is inevitably a feminist re-interpretive effort, aiming at examining gendered discourses and implications in *King Lear* in the name of the "mother."

I. Why the "Mother"?

Once thought to cause hysteria by rising or swelling in the body and disturb the action of other organs, "the mother," literally "the womb," was used figuratively in the English Renaissance to describe the disease "hysterica passio" or hysteria. In *King Lear*, the shock of his daughters' atrocious behavior to him provides ample materials and causes for the production of psychosomatic symptoms in Lear. But why does Shakespeare name those symptoms the "mother"? The appearance of the image of the "mother" in the play is not merely decorative and accidental. The image is a fundamental part of the gendered language and expression that Shakespeare inherited from contemporary medical discourses.

Shakespeare responded acutely to the notion of the "mother" as one of the important ideas of his time, metaphorizing it and even building it into the fabric of *King Lear*. The sources of the notion are complex. They are steeped in the ideological dimensions of hysteria in the late sixteenth century and its troubled relation to magic and witchcraft. As Kenneth Muir, the well-known Shakespeare scholar and editor of the Arden *King Lear*, writes, "It has been suggested that Shakespeare shared the skeptical views of Reginald Scot and Samuel Harsnett on demonology and witchcraft. At least it may be said the mental illness of Lear has nothing supernatural about it" (32). Indeed, in the case of Lear, he is often deemed naturally mad, by no means a person who is under a spell nor a person who counterfeits possession.

Muir is often recognized as the first one who made known the full extent of Harsnett's influence on *Lear* and published the results of a detailed comparison of the two texts.⁸ Muir traced over eighty passages in Harsnett for which a parallel could be found in the play. Since over

fifty of the parallels appear in the third act, he concluded that the storm scenes owe more to Harsnett than to any other source.⁹ Shakespeare apparently took these names straight from Harsnett's antipapist pamphlet *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Imposture* (1603). In Act III, Scene iv, Edgar performing as Poor Tom imitates some of the signs of possession, and pretends that some of the devilish fiends haunting him. Names he mentions include Flibbertigibbet, Hoppedance, Modu, Mahu, and Mulkin.¹⁰ Harsnett also wrote about Richard Mainy, one of the would-be victims of the "mother," that he "had a spice of the *Hysterica passio*, as seems, from his youth, hee himself termes it the Moother . . . a poore passion of the Mother, which a thousand poore girles in England had worse" (25).

Obviously Shakespeare was familiar with Samuel Harsnett's work and his characterizations of Edgar and Lear's emotional sensations were affected by it. According to Hoeniger, Harsnett's *Declaration* attracted Shakespeare's attention chiefly "because of Harsnett's sense of humor and lively style" (202). For Brownlow, "*King Lear* is Shakespeare's reply to Harsnett . . . appropriating or engulfing Harsnett's own book, and situating its contents in a landscape of violence and alienation that, whether we read it as pre- or post-Christian, offers a devastating commentary on the spiritual condition of contemporary England" (128). Indeed, the pamphlet entered deeply into Shakespeare's imagination and did more than offering details for Edgar's part or a topical allusion to the "mother." In addition to Harsnett's *Declaration*, Muir also suggests that the image of the "mother" might be derived from Jorden's *Briefe Discourse*:

The second great shock comes in the second act when Lear finds Kent in the stocks. This causes the first physical symptoms of hysteria, which were probably borrowed by Shakespeare from Harsnett's pamphlet on demoniacs or from Edward Jorden's *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603), which shows "that divers strange actions and passions of the body of man, which in the common opinion, are imputed to the devil, have their true naturall causes, and do accompanie this

Disease.” But the symptoms would now be described as “racing heart” and “rising blood pressure.”¹¹ (27-28)

It is often speculated that *King Lear* must have been written after 1603, for both Harsnett’s *Declaration* and Jorden’s *Briefe Discourse* were published in 1603. As Brownlow notes, “Sometime between [the publication of Harsnett’s *Declaration*] in the early summer of 1603 and the writing of *King Lear*, probably in the late 1604-5, Shakespeare read Harsnett’s *Declaration*” (107).

In Renaissance England, Jorden’s theory of the pathological “mother” figured prominently in medical literature and was invested with cultural significance at the turn of the seventeenth century. At this time, rather than the wandering of the womb, hysteria was often deemed a matter of derangement of female vaginal cavity or a symptom of the retained seed of women that became corrupted and poisonous. The female seed produced by the womb became a problem of female sexuality and then a moral stigma. The purging of the corrupted female seed from the womb and vagina was always the center of medical attention. For this reason Jorden and his contemporaries believed hysteria could never be a male disease. Jorden further claimed that all uterine irregularities generated “vapors” that drifted through the body, inducing pathological states that were facilitated by the symbiotic interaction of the entire system. A power of “sympathy,” Jorden reasoned, linked the womb to the rest of the body. For some, the vapors and the mother, often used interchangeably, were still proofs of demonic possession rather than somatic ailment. But for Jorden, “the perturbations of the minde” were oftentimes to blame for both.¹² In Jorden’s *Briefe Discourse*, hysteria emerged as a significant diagnostic category.

Again, we may wonder what Lear has to do with the “mother,” since hysteria has always been etymologically linked with women and Lear’s physiological anatomy is obviously deficient of such a disease. As Janet Adelman comments,

The bizarreness of these lines has not always been appreciated. In

them, Lear quite literally acknowledges the presence of the sulphurous pit within him. Suffocated by the emotions that he thinks of as female, Lear gives them the name of the woman's part, as though he himself bore that diseased and wandering womb within, for "mother" is a technical term for the uterus; "Hysterica passio" or "the suffocation of the mother" is the disease caused by its wandering. (114)

Adelman later elaborates her point: "Lear's words imply not only that he has the disease but also that he has the female organ (the 'mother') itself: even if one wants to make this passage less bizarre by reading 'this mother' (II. iv. 56) as the name of the disease rather than the organ, Lear's reference to the mother's swelling upward associates it unmistakably with the rising womb itself" (300). Although it may sound bizarre from the perspective of sexual difference, the use of the womb/mother image represents a fairly conscious part of Lear's growing awareness and fear of female sexuality and the maternal power in general.

Another way to read the image of the "mother" is to take it simply as a figure of speech which Shakespeare employs to give expression to Lear's emotional state because as a trope it figures convincingly in the overall dramatic context. There is also the possibility that what Lear really suffers is a different kind of disease. Lear's "mother" is in fact the phenomenon known as hypochondriasis in men because "suffocatio hypochondriaca" causes numerous derangements of the abdominal viscera and produces many similar symptoms to hysteria.¹³

In a recent study *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*, F. David Hoeniger convincingly shows us that "a typical medical diagnosis of Lear's illness in Shakespeare's time would identify it as acute hypochondriac melancholy developing into mania" (330) because Lear's emotional pattern is characterized by "abrupt changeableness" so that "when he is momentarily overcome by grief or self-pity, his rage, and with it his craving for revenge, quickly reassert themselves" (326).

Lear claims he is "a poor old man, as full of grief as age" (II. iv.

270–71).¹⁴ His grief breeds melancholy and self-pitying; however, this state of mind does not last long. In the next moment, he is bursting with rage. Hoeniger focuses on explaining Lear's changeableness and flightiness, as well as his swinging between melancholy and mania. As he observes, "Already by 1.5 Lear himself indicates that his combined rage [choler adust] and sorrow [melancholy] may drive him mad. By 2.4 he also expresses his sensation of effects on his body, especially his heart. As the malignant vapors rise ultimately to his brain, they affect first his phantasy or imagination and ultimately overcome his reason, crossing the final stage from melancholia to mania" (330).

To ask the question once again, "Why the 'mother'?" We argue that the tragedy of Lear lies not in his death, but in the terrible sufferings of the "mother" he has to endure before he comes to the end of his struggle for his manhood and thus human dignity. The image of the "mother" is a protean image, open to many different interpretations. However, for our purpose, the significance and meaning of this gendered image in the play depends on our close examination of the way the image is deployed and represented within the overall dramatic context.

II. The Maternal Power of "Dis-ease": The Womb, the "Mother," and the Daughter-Mothers

Lear's authority rests on the fixed "frame of nature" (I. iv. 266) and absoluteness of the patriarchal world. The love-test which ignites the emotional turmoil can be seen as his gesture and attempt to make a total claim of absolute authority. Lear originally seeks to rely on Cordelia's "kind nursery" (I. i. 123) as a substitute for the absent or lost Queen/mother.¹⁵ As Coppélia Kahn points out, Lear has a "need for Cordelia as daughter-mother" (40). However, Cordelia's "nothing," a show of her dutifulness, becomes in Lear's ears a signal of her ungratefulness. It illustrates the cause and nature of Lear's ensuing anger—much ado about "nothing." Moreover, Cordelia's "nothing" is deemed by Lear as a threat to his power and authority, thwarting and jolting his kingly and manly self-complacency and expectations. Rather

than conforming herself to her father's desire, Cordelia adheres to her feelings. And this adherence to her position elevates Lear's rage to the heroic proportions of the "barbarous Scythian" (I. i. 115) and the "Dragon" (I. i. 121). By withdrawing from his heart all natural parental love, Lear turns himself into a monstrous father. But the image of the angry, devouring father is preceded by his invocation of a dangerous goddess—"The mysteries of Hecate and the night" (I. i. 109)—who transforms into the powerful maternal force within—the "mother"—in Act II, Scene iv and challenges the patriarchal power of Lear.

By giving his kingdom and crown away, Lear castrates himself and seriously mars his manhood. He makes his daughters his mothers, as the fool bitterly claims, "thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers, . . . thou gavst them the rod and putt'st down thine own breeches" (I. iv. 168–70). When his manhood is undermined, Lear becomes unmanly and tearful like a woman. Yet Lear always struggles to reassert his manhood by shouting insults against the maternal power of generation. He takes revenge in a direct attack on Goneril's power of reproduction. Into her womb, he would "convey sterility" (I. iv. 276):

Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
 To make this creature fruitful!
 Into her womb convey sterility!
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,
 And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honour her! If she must teem,
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart isnature'd torment to her! (I. iv. 273–81)

Out of his rage, Lear becomes obsessed with and heaps abuses on Goneril's generative power. He would not have the womb of his unnatural daughter bear a child, and if she must have one, let the child be to her as she has been to him. What is excessive is the violence and bitterness of the curse in which he prays for Goneril's sterility. Lear's misogynistic curses on Goneril's reproductive organs are projections of

his fear of the feminine element and its maternal power. His purpose is to reinforce the sexual/gender difference in order to maintain the basis of his masculine superiority. Goneril's cursed womb or "organs of increase" foreshadows the swelling of Lear's "mother" and becomes the return of the repressed in Lear. As a matter of fact, Lear's earlier curse against Cordelia also strikes against the maternal power: "Better thou/Hadst not been born than not t' have pleased me better" (I. i. 233–34).

By the end of Act I, Lear voices his fear of losing his mind:

O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven;
Keep me in temper; I would not be mad! (I. v. 43–44)

But heaven does not answer Lear's appeals. The events of Act II will drive him still closer to the brink of madness. Cordelia, the "daughter-mother" (Kahn 40), is the one who initiates Lear's madness, while Goneril and Regan are the so-called "bad mothers" (Kahn 45) who aggravate Lear's wrath by their filial ingratitude and are the last straw which forces Lear in Act II Scene iv to face the rise of the "mother" and to confront the swell of "womanish" feelings.¹⁶ For Lear, his well-being depends on the proper governance of passion by reason, the body by the head. The symbolic rising movement of the "mother" bears both medical and socio-political implications because it disrupts Lear's well-being, causes choking discomforts in Lear's kingly body, challenges Lear's manhood and identity, and eventually destabilizes the hierarchy of the body politic.

And a little later, when Lear is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, he is able to recognize his part in creating two monstrous daughters: "'Twas this flesh begot/Those pelican daughters" (II. iv. 73–74). When Lear identifies Goneril as the disease in his own body, he comes to recognize once again his own complicity in her making:

We'll no more meet, no more one another;
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,

Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
 A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,
 In my corrupted blood. (II. iv. 218–23)

While disowning Goneril, Lear is aware of his own share in her “dis-eased” vileness, a recognition that fulfills his masculine projection that his daughters are but extensions of himself. It is not a gesture of reconciliation but a way to justify his existence as a patriarch and a subject. Lear thus makes himself a grotesque figure, harboring the diseased feminine other. As Adelman writes, “And as he imagines her a swelling within him—‘a boil, A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,’ in his corrupted blood—he takes that dark place into himself; his language figures his body as grotesquely female, pregnant with the disease that is his daughter. Acknowledging Goneril his flesh and blood entails making his own body the site of her monstrous femaleness” (109).

Lear’s “daughter/mothers” make his kingly body a grotesque body which is pregnant with the monstrous (m)other—the pathologized hysterical feminine other. The monstrous (m)other, originally designated as the element below, rises and climbs the hierarchical ladder of the body politic. Its purpose is to invert the dominant male body model of Lear and disturb the self-complacency and reassuring primacy of the male. As Lisa Jardine cogently argues, when Shakespeare has Lear “succumb to ‘a fit of the mother’—hysteria, he is employing the ‘inversion theme’ of carnival misrule in *King Lear*. . . . Lear, subjected to the misrule of his domineering and scolding daughters, responds with a peculiarly female malady” (110). Although the monstrous (m)other in Lear carries an irreducible difference, it will eventually be re-appropriated and re-constituted in order to recuperate his manhood.

Lear’s claim that his kingly body is being pathologized and contaminated from within is keen and perceptive. This unidentified disease corresponds to the identified disease of the “mother” or “*Hysterica passio*” invoked by Lear earlier. It causes “dis-ease” in Lear like that of the “mother.” The two diseases join together in Lear’s body,

traversing and feminizing Lear while embodying Lear's fantasy about the dis-eased other, the female sex, and his feelings of desertion by his daughter-mothers. Being betrayed and abandoned by Goneril and Regan, Lear struggles to maintain his manhood by trying to drive back his tears and suppresses his emotions:

To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
 And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
 Stain my man's cheeks! . . .
 You think I'll weep;
 No, I'll not weep;
 I have full cause of weeping, [Storm heard at a distance.] but this
 heart
 Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
 Or ere I'll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad. (II. iv. 270–84)

Lear's belief that tears, emotions, and passions have the power of effeminizing is not at all unique to English Renaissance masculinity, but his expression underscores the fact that his manhood crisis is understood in terms of status and gender.

In Act IV, Cordelia re-enters, after long absence, to sweeten Lear's imagination (IV. vi. 130) and to fight against the burning, scalding stench from the dark, womb-like "sulphurous pit" (IV. vi. 126–28). Assuming the role of a maternal caretaker, she is identified as the "one daughter, /Who redeems nature from the general curse/Which twain have brought her to" (IV. vi. 202–4).¹⁷ Her forgiveness eases Lear's guilt. Her kiss repairs "those violent harms that [her] two sisters/Have in [his] reverence made!" (IV. vii. 28–9). At this moment, she comes to embody at once the benign and nurturing daughter-mother, the role that Lear has assigned her in the first place, and the therapeutic force which restores the "mother" back to its original position below and thus appeases the raging "mother" in Lear. For many, the meeting of father and daughter in Act IV, Scene vii is one of the most touching scenes in Shakespeare. No word of bitterness escapes the lips of either.

- Lear Do not laugh at me:
 For, as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia.
- Cordelia And so I am, I am
- Lear Be your tears wet? Yes, faith, I pray weep not;
 If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
 I know you do not love me; for your sisters
 Have, as I do remember, done me wrong?
 You have some cause, they have not.
- Cordelia No cause, no cause. (IV. vii. 68–75)

Here again, as in the opening scene, Cordelia is quite meager in speech. Her answers, given in a soft, low, gentle voice—"an excellent thing in woman" (V. iii. 272)—presents to us a heart brimful of feelings that remained unexpressed. Cordelia's love calms Lear's "mother," "redeem[s] all sorrows" that Lear has ever felt (V. iii. 265–66), and makes Lear's reconciliation with her easy. As Adelman points out, "Cordelia's 'no cause' (IV. vii. 75) kills the great rage in him (IV. vii. 78–79), returning him to the dream of maternal plenitude, where love is outside the realm of deserving" (121).

In the prison scene, before Cordelia is taken out to be hanged, the sacrificial nature of her role is explicit, especially when Lear says: "Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, /The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee?" (V. iii. 20–21). Lear's speech demonstrates that Cordelia's role is that of a scapegoat/other in this father-daughter reunion. Although condescending in his gesture, Lear still holds fast his paternal authority and manhood. He defines his manhood and well-being by Cordelia's sacrifice, by luring the wandering "daughter-(m)other" back to its right place. In his essay, "The Family in Shakespeare's Development: Tragedy and Sacredness," C. L. Barber writes of Lear's prison speech: "But he still wants his daughter 'to love [her] father all.' A chasm of irony opens as we realize that he is leading her off to death. His vision of prison amounts, almost literally, to a conception of heaven on earth—*his* heaven, the 'kind nursery' after all" (199). Stanley Cavell also makes a

similar argument that Lear's desire to be alone with his daughter, expressed so touchingly in his "Come, Let's away to prison" speech in Act V, Scene iii, represents "not the correction but the repetition of his strategy in the first scene" (296). Lear's newly fashioned manhood requires Cordelia to play the same role of obedient daughter as at the beginning of the play.

Lear's entrance with Cordelia dead in his arms answers directly to his own evocation of "sacrifices" at the beginning of the scene. Cordelia, submissive, passive, and unresisting, literally becomes a sacrificial lamb for his manhood. At first, to Lear, Cordelia's "nothing" and silence is not a mark of virtue, but a denial of filial affection. Now, over Cordelia's dead body, Lear recognizes her "nothing" and silence as a mark of virtue and is the one who has the last word. In this very last scene, it is the dying Lear who has the power to construct the final meaning of his and Cordelia's life. "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, /Look there, look there!" (V. iii. 309–10), says Lear. Lear's words turn Cordelia-as-corpse into the spectacle and the object of his male gaze. Tamed, silenced, and appropriated, Cordelia, as Adelman shrewdly argues, is only "a prop for Lear's anguish" (127).

This appropriation of Cordelia is not an act of love but a violation of it that echoes and repeats Lear's ritual of possessiveness in the opening scene. Cordelia becomes his surrogate daughter-mother. She eventually fills the vacuum in Lear's heart at his death bed. Although her lines are minimal, Cordelia's position is pivotal. Her directness in the opening scene provides the catalyst for Lear's "mother" to swell. Her dutifulness near the end of the play, nevertheless, offers comforts to pacify the "mother."

Lear's "mother" is born of his confrontation with his daughter-mothers. This confrontation originates from his patriarchal desire, his idea of property, and his sense of the body politic. All these thoughts lead him to deem his daughters as part of himself and make him secretly desire maternal care to shelter him physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Although Lear recognizes his immense loss and his initial error at the end, he is able to turn his loss into final gain and assert his re-fashioned manhood.

Lear's "mother" forces Lear to embark on a journey of self-fashioning. And yet the fashioning of Lear's manhood is set against the prevalent denigration of the womb, the "mother," and the daughter-mothers. Whereas dutiful Cordelia is reduced to the silent and the domestic at the end of the play, Lear becomes exemplary of the "human condition," with a re-fashioned manhood. Lear's reconciliation with Cordelia is in fact the appropriation of the "mother" and the maternal principle. While being a rite of passage for Lear, the rise and fall of the "mother," enacted in and echoed by the movement of Cordelia's loss and return, punctuates and gives structure to the entire play.

III. "This Tempest in My Mind": Lear's Rite of Self-fashioning

But where the greater malady is fix'd,
 The lesser is scarce felt.
 . . . When the mind's free,
 The body's delicate; this tempest in my mind
 Doth from my sense take all feeling else
 Save what beats there—filial ingratitude.

—King Lear (III. iv. 8–9, 11–15)

In his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt proposes a now familiar mechanism of self-fashioning: "self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist—must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed" (9). Thus, according to Greenblatt, Lear's self-fashioning is achieved in relation to the "(m)other" (the feminine other within), his three daughter-mothers (the feminine other without), the tempest in his mind, and the storm in the heath. Greenblatt also claims that self-fashioning necessarily involves "some effacement or undermining, some loss of self" (10). In the process of Lear's self-fashioning, it involves the effacement of his fatherhood, the undermining of his kingship, and the loss of his mind and manhood in the storm.

If not for the filial ingratitude of his daughter-mothers, Lear might not have the chance to experience the fits of the mother and to get to know the feminine other or the tempest within him. As Kahn suggests, "By calling his sorrow hysterical, Lear decisively characterizes it as feminine. . . . It was the disease of the *hyster*, the womb" (33). The swelling of the mother, "the greater malady" (III. iv. 8), is threatening to Lear in part because it is perceived as achieving the effect of feminization. On the other hand, his conjuring up of the mother reflects his need of this "threatening other," the necessary evil, to further secure his manhood. The rise of the mother in the characteristic fashion of the return of the repressed also shows that there is a much repressed desire within Lear, which is Lear's feminine (m)other.¹⁸ When Lear is forced to acknowledge and call on his feminine (m)other, the whole play is brought to its emotional pitch.

It is obvious that the "mother" revealed by Lear's words is a complex representational figure, simultaneously "real" and "fantasized." It is "real" in the sense that Lear can in no way deny or repress hysteria's urgent emergency and its terrifying power and wrath. As Carroll Camden argues, "Apparently a male who presented choking as a nervous symptom was, by analogy, said to be suffering from the same disease" (393).¹⁹ It is "fantasized" in the sense that there are simply not enough medical symptoms to justify the claim that Lear is a male hysteric. Nevertheless, Lear's use of the word "mother" indicates that emotions and affects are feminized regardless of the sex of the person who has them.

In *King Lear*, Lear's "mother" is more than a narrowly conceived medical malady, newly discovered in England and emancipated from its demonic bondage. It is a potent symbol, symbolizing Lear's progression to insanity and signifying Lear's resilient resistance to disintegration. It is also a trope for the other within, through which Lear addresses his fears of losing manhood. As Stephen Orgel notes, "The frightening part of the teleology for the Renaissance mind is precisely the fantasy of its reversal, the conviction that men can turn into—or be turned into—women; or perhaps more exactly, can be turned *back* into woman, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be

realized in the first place" (14).

The "mother," as something "real" and "fantasized" and as something "other" and "more" in Lear's body, reveals itself to be something lost, the loss of royal identity and masculinity in general, that needs to be regained and refashioned. It serves not only as a metaphor employed by Lear to express his emotional and physical sensations but also as a trope for Lear's rite of passage unto self-knowledge. In appearance, Lear's manhood and the "mother" may sound like two warring factions in Lear. The truth is that this warring state is his rite of self-fashioning.

Through the figure of the "mother," Shakespeare communicates Lear's pathologized but ever-elusive feminized state of anguish and anger in a male voice. By conveying the scene of male emotional anguish through the "dis-ease" of female generation organ, "Shakespeare has Lear experience his suffering specifically as a feminization which must be repressed, beaten back down, in order to regain control over his kingdom, his family, and himself" (Micale 250). His use of the term "mother" reinforces the construction of woman as governed by hysterical passion rather than by reason. The "mother," as Lear says, is the "element's below" (II. iv. 56), occupying a crucial and yet under-privileged position in the overcharged and imaginary terrain of Lear's kingly body. This position is highly gendered, epitomizing the position of the woman in a patriarchal society. It is the posited "negative" ground embedded in a constructed and apparently "positive" masculine body of Lear.

Given the entire absence of literal mothers in the play, this figure of the "mother" seems particularly significant and meaningful. It cannot be confined and localized in Lear alone. In fact, it involves every single character in the whirling emotional storm and chokes them to death one by one. Indeed, much of *King Lear's* raw power comes from the swell of Lear's "mother" or the awakening of the maternal force in Lear. Suffocating Lear's pride and dignity as a patriarch and monarch, this raw maternal power in Lear exerts far greater impact than Lear can imagine. It is "the tempest in [his] mind" (III. iv. 12), fashioning his character and destiny and corresponding to the storm,

“the fretful elements” (III. i. 4) in nature.

The storm fleshes out the turmoil within Lear. When Lear is rejected and humiliated by both Goneril and Regan, his restless and swelling mother is embodied by the rumbling storm “which is a projection on the macrocosm of the tempest in the microcosm” (Muir 28). E. M. W. Tillyard in his classic study, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, also proposes the same view in discussing the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. As he writes, “Commonest of all correspondences in poetry is that between the storms and earthquakes of the great world and the stormy passions of man” (93). Thus in the case of *King Lear*, a king plagued by the “mother” will produce the same symptomatic effects in nature and the state because the king’s body is a synecdoche for the body of nature and the state. While the “mothering”—the rising or the swelling—of the “mother,” of the tempest in his mind, is a moment of crisis mentally, the storm’s monstrous power to drench the steeples and drown the cocks can be seen as an extension or externalization of the errant power of the “mother” to shake Lear’s manhood physically. Thus, by means of the storm, the relentless and restless female power of the “mother” is given a local habitation and a raw manifestation.

When provoked by the sight of the naked Edgar, Lear expresses his insight into the animal nature of man:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’s’t the worm
no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume.
Ha! here’s three on’s are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself;
unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked
animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. (III.
iv. 100–107)

This speech is one of Lear’s most profound speeches about man’s nature and manhood in general. When Lear asks “Is man no more than this?”, the “man” in question points to the male naked body. This question shows that Lear’s concern for man’s debased condition is derived from his concern for his manhood. His discovery of his

manhood is through recognizing man's nakedness stripped of all unnecessary masks and at the same time denouncing female body, especially its power of generation. Thus, when Lear asks Edgar to "Come, unbutton here" (III. iv. 107), he wants not only to join Poor Tom in his nakedness but also to strip off his royal identity, to relieve himself from the choking sensations of the "mother," and to fashion for himself a new identity built on the nakedness of man rather than on the kingship. Lear's "mother" leads Lear to take to the path of self-knowledge. It is the mode and limitation of his being in the world. And yet, even at this moment of enlightenment, Lear defines "man" against "woman" and his "pelican daughters" (III. iv. 74): "nothing could have subdu'd nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (III. iv. 69-70).

Lear's self-fashioning is achieved through meeting the challenges posed by the swelling of the mother and answering the question about his identity: "Who is it that can tell me who I am" (I. iv. 227). Lear's identity is re-fashioned through the madness/reason or hysteria/manhood dialectic. In re-fashioning his manhood, Lear never completely loses his reason. His state is more accurately described by Edgar as "reason in madness" (IV. vi. 173)—"matter and impertinency mix'd" (IV. vi. 172), sense and nonsense intertwined, self and the feminine other entangled. The "mother" enables Lear to experience "a process of subjectification" (306), as Louis Montrose defines it. It provides the momentum for him to sharpen his self-knowledge and awareness. This process makes Lear a thinking subject and an initiator of actions.

IV. Conclusion

What is striking about *King Lear* is Shakespeare's insistence in using the image of the "mother" to portray Lear's madness and relate the whole play. The "mother," which figures as a potent motif and symbol in *King Lear*, represents Lear's "dis-eased" femininity at the core of Lear's very being. When his masculine power and pride is challenged, this feminine other in him will react and start to swell. The

“mother,” thus, shows Lear’s binary frame of mind—manhood and the feminine other—at work because what is manifested in the fits of the mother is not just the plight of Lear but also the constitution of the feminine other in Lear’s manhood. In other words, this “mother,” which may sound like a slip of the tongue, reveals an unconscious need in Lear. That is, his need of the (m)other—the maternal or feminine other—to help fashion his manhood. In fact, Lear’s self-fashioned manhood is achieved through his on going struggle with his (m)other.

When he strips himself of his power and portions out his land, Lear, by calling on the “mother” which occupies no visible, legitimate space within his kingly body, initiates the dismantling of monarchical/patriarchal order and the instatement of the feminine other. Given the high premium placed on reason and self-control as the most important constituents of Renaissance masculinity, Lear’s anger, passion, and desire is always cast individually in terms of psychic turmoil, and collectively as an insurrection against the state or as a challenge to social order and cohesion. On the verge of his nervous breakdown, he must keep asserting his manhood and make clear distinction of sexual/gender difference in order to safeguard his identity as a rational being.

In *King Lear*, the “mother” becomes the focal point of Lear’s emotional trajectory, showing humanity in the course of emotional and identity crisis. The symptomatic manifestation of the mother is central not only to the father-daughter relationship between Lear and his three daughters but also to the progress of the play. Though the “mother” is mentioned just once, it is both structurally and thematically crucial. It represents one of the dominant themes of the play—Lear’s madness. By no means a nonsensical image in the actual development of the plot, it weaves together characters and themes into an intricate web. Its effect can be felt everywhere, especially in the storm scene, and resonates with the fate of the main characters in the play. The “mother” in a sense is a mirror held up to Lear’s nature: that is, Lear’s persistent insistence in asserting his manhood. It is invoked in Lear’s speech for the sake of his “male” self-reflection, self-representation, and self-fashioning.

Mobile and capricious, Lear's "mother" is an emblem of whirling chaos and a sign of self-knowledge. From the rise to the fall of the mother, from the loss to the return of Cordelia, Lear undergoes his rite of self-fashioning. His self-fashioning accounts for the masculine appropriation of the (m)other in a patriarchal society. Re-reading *King Lear* in the name of the "mother" reveals multifarious manifestations of the "mother" at work—at once a disease, a metaphor, and a motif in the text. It reveals the working of the binary mechanism embedded in masculinity and in Lear's self-fashioning.

NOTES

¹ In Renaissance England, female sexuality was often referred to in masculine terms in Galenic tradition, such as the references to the secretions of the Barthelin glands as "semen" or "seed."

² As Ilza Veith points out in her canonical *Hysteria: The History of a Disease*, "The term 'vapors' originated about this time and referred to emanations from a disordered uterus which might ascend and produce symptoms in other parts of the body. This belief gained such credence that subsequently, particularly in English literature, the term not only became synonymous with hysteria but was also descriptive of many lesser and insubstantial female behavioral peculiarities" (122).

³ As Mary Lefkowitz points out, "The term hysteria means 'wombiness'; *hysterai*, literally the 'latter parts', is the politely vague term for uterus (medical texts also use the more descriptive *metrai*, the mothering area)" (13).

⁴ Within Western medical discourses, the story of hysteria's excessively abundant and diverse history invariably begins with Hippocrates's treatise *On the Diseases of Women*. In it Hippocrates introduces the association of hysteria with the female reproductive organs and defines it as a disturbance caused by the pathological migrations of a restless, dissatisfied womb. The recommended cure by Hippocrates—apart from a uterine fumigation meant to lure the uterus back to its proper place—was marriage and pregnancy, a cure by submission to the yoke of patriarchy and the institutionalized reproduction of mothering. Hippocrates's naming of the disease "hysteria," by taking its very name from the uterus, achieved social and sexual domination over women by reducing

them in scientific theory to a single reproductive organ. In a word, in Hippocrates's texts, the womb was characterized as the monstrous (m)other representing the wandering and restless desire of the woman. For a detailed discussion of Hippocrates, see Helen King's "Once Upon a Text: Hysteria from Hippocrates," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, edited by Sander Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, Elaine Showalter (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 3–90; Lesley Dean-Jones's *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996), 65–77.

⁵ As Stephen Booth writes, "The tragedy of Lear, deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare, is commonly regarded as his greatest achievement" (98).

⁶ Here, Lear calls the suffocating feeling the "mother." However, the heart is Lear's alternative name for the suffocating feeling rising within him: "O me! My heart, my rising heart! but, down!" (II. iv. 121).

⁷ Hoeniger, in his *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*, points out that "Lear's lines present a real problem, since hysteria or 'the mother,' as the Elizabethans usually called it, continued to be regarded, as it had been since ancient times, as an illness affecting women alone" (320)

⁸ Muir shows that many details of Lear's madness and Edgar's simulated possession are derived from Harsnett's idioms and his experiences of the demoniacs. He prints a list of the parallels in Appendix 7 of his *Arden King Lear*: pp. 239–242.

⁹ For detailed information, see Kenneth Muir's seminal article "Samuel Harsnett and King Lear," *Review of English Studies* 2 (1951): 11–21.

¹⁰ On this, see appendix 7 to Kenneth Muir's Arden edition of *King Lear*.

¹¹ In his note to *King Lear*, Kenneth Muir, the editor of the Arden *King Lear*, also points out that the use of "the mother" in the play has the connection with Jorden (85).

¹² As Jorden writes, "the affections of the mind doe beare such rule in this disease . . . which being by policie or good instructions and perswasions removed, this disease is easily overcome" (Chap. 7, 26).

¹³ Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* discusses this "hypochondriacal suffocation" more fully in the subject "Symptoms of Windy Hypochondriacal Melancholy" (I: 410–413).

¹⁴ As Lear says to Regan: "You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,

/As full of grief as age; wretched in both!" (II. iv. 270–71).

¹⁵ The motherless world of Lear is also dealt with perceptively in Coppélia Kahn's essay "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*." Kahn's essay is a deliberate attempt to "excavate . . . the maternal subtext, . . . like an archaeologist, to uncover the hidden mother in the hero's inner world" (35). As Kahn's essay title implies, from the very first scene, "we are shown only fathers and their godlike capacity to make or mar their children. Through this conspicuous omission the play articulates a patriarchal conception of the family in which children owe their existence to their fathers alone; the mother's role in procreation is eclipsed by the father's, which is used to affirm male prerogative and male power" (35–6). It is in this patriarchal and motherless world that Lear poses questions regarding his identity, experiences the rise of the "mother," and sets out on his quest to refashion his manhood.

¹⁶ In his invocation of nature to support his demands on his daughters, Lear appeals to the gods in gendered terms: ". . . touch me with noble anger, /And let not women's weapons, water drops/Stain my man's cheeks" (II. iv. 274–76).

¹⁷ McLuskie considers that "The figure of Cordelia is used as a channel for the response to her suffering father. Her part in establishing the terms of the conflict is over by Act I; when she reappears it is an emblem of dutiful pity" (101).

¹⁸ Kahn interprets Lear's "mother" "as his repressed identification with the mother" (36).

¹⁹ See Carroll Camden's article for detail, "The Suffocation of the Mother" in *Modern Language Notes* 63.6 (June 1948), 390–93.

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