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MUSING ON FORGIVENESS: A RESPONSE TO ROY SCHAFER

King Lear, a play of exceptional harshness and brutality, in which even the gods seem to enjoy the spectacle of human suffering—“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods,” says Edgar; “They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36–37)—is also a play without mothers.

Queen Lear has been so long absent that she is never alluded to—almost as if Lear’s daughters, like Athena, had sprung full-grown from their father’s brain. Edmund’s mother, the subject of the conversation between Kent and Gloucester that opens the play, is mentioned blushing by Gloucester, who had “good sport” (I.i.22) with her in the conceiving of his bastard son Edmund, but she herself does not appear. The legitimate Edgar, who refers to Edmund’s mother only by reference to her sexuality—“The dark and vicious place where thee he got” (V.iii.173)—says nothing about his own maternal heritage. In a world of men and tough-minded daughters, who enact the worst stereotypes of masculine self-interest and aggression, Cordelia stands out—both in her refusal to lie for personal gain and in her capacity for loving forgiveness. Her “No cause, no cause” (IV.vii.75) in response to Lear’s acknowledgment that she has reason to wish him harm, appears to wipe clean the slate of Lear’s wrongdoing. How does she arrive at such a transcendent capacity for forgiveness—or does she? This is the question Roy Schafer poses in his subtle and thought-provoking essay.

I raise the question of mothers because Schafer invokes them in his reference to Melanie Klein (1946) and the importance of the depressive position (where hatred and aggression can be held as internal objects, instead of being split off and projected onto a persecuting other) for the achievement of the ability to forgive, as well as the desire to make reparation for one’s own destructive wishes and impulses. Implicitly, in Klein’s paradigm (as more explicitly in object relations theory), the quality

of the mother's caretaking—her empathic attunement or lack thereof—is critical to the baby's future ability to integrate its internal world.¹

If we are to take such a legacy of maternal care as essential to Cordelia's emotional makeup, we must also ask ourselves why her sisters are so deficient. Yet no matter how much we might speculate about the childhood of the three sisters, the play does not give us any history. Instead we are left with the quandary of the opening scenes. Somehow—and for reasons we don't really understand—Cordelia is different from her sisters, who are willing to say anything to their overbearing father to get what they want. While accurate in their assessment of Lear's declining powers, Goneril and Regan have no pity for him. Perhaps they also resent his obvious favoritism toward their younger sister. What we are presented with, however, is a family crisis—as if we'd been suddenly set down in the midst of a domestic psychodrama, with no clue as to its provocation.

I'm writing here as a literary scholar, rather than a clinician—asking how we know what we know, on the basis of the evidence the play gives us. Not much, in my view, is given in terms of Cordelia's inner life.

Whereas women characters—shrewd, talky, self-confident, manipulative, loving, and wise—dominate Shakespeare's comedies, in the tragedies (with the notable exception of Cleopatra) they cede their place to the anguished and self-destructive men who occupy center stage.² Whereas Cordelia, Ophelia, Desdemona, and even Lady Macbeth make a good showing in the beginnings of their respective dramas, they fade into the background as the real action gets under way. In the end, they are either victims or minor players in the relentless unfolding of the tragedies enacted by the central male figures in their lives.

While Shakespeare doesn't give us much to go on in terms of constructing full psychological portraits of these women—given his shift of attention to the inner life of the tragic hero—any actress worth her

¹Klein (as I read her) seems more concerned with the infant's relationship with the mother's breast than with her person. Yet her theoretical model of the paranoid/schizoid and depressive positions opens the possibility of thinking about mothers as independent beings with "minds" of their own. In *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Sprengnether 1990), I explore some of the reasons why Freud may have found it difficult to theorize maternal subjectivity.

²Feminist critics of Shakespeare have amply demonstrated this point. See in particular Linda Bamber (1982), Carol Thomas Neely (1985), and Marianne Novy (1980).

salt must portray her character as psychologically credible. It is part of Shakespeare's genius to make us think that mere words on a page or spoken in performance can conjure a fully realized personality, someone whose actions and motivations we can believe in—even when we have so little dramatic input.³ How, then, would an actress seek to portray Cordelia as a complex woman with realistically conflicting emotions, who is nonetheless able to speak the most healing lines in the play?

By treating Cordelia as an analysand, whose motives he can intuit or discern through the resonances of her speech, Roy Schafer gives one possible answer to this question. Yet I take his true interest to lie not so much in Cordelia's psychology as in the question of forgiveness that she dramatizes—and represents. Cordelia is Schafer's vehicle for a deeper meditation on the sources (and limitations) of forgiveness. For this reason, I choose to view the question of Cordelia's character as providing an entrée into the more interesting (to me) and problematic one of forgiveness.

Early in his essay, Schafer distinguishes between forgiveness—which I take to mean a relinquishing of anger and resentment over an obvious injury or wrongdoing—and what he calls “waiving of forgiveness,” a more complex process in which forgiveness is moot because the person wronged no longer regards the offense as a live issue.⁴ In the first instance, the pain or injury is still fresh, yet the person who has been hurt chooses to extend sympathy, and not to act on feelings of anger or revenge. In the second, the injured person has moved past the point of caring about the original offense. In this state, it no longer matters who did what to whom, and one is free to “waive” the question of forgiveness—as Cordelia appears to do when she says “No cause, no cause.”

Schafer cites Salman Akhtar's essay (2002) summarizing the psychoanalytic literature on forgiveness, which I want to quote from here

³While this statement might seem self-evident, new historicist, cultural materialist, and deconstructive schools of criticism either ignore or deny the relevance of psychological verisimilitude. More recently, Harold Bloom's enormously popular book, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human* (1998), and Stephen Greenblatt's literary biography, *Will in the World* (2004), have begun to turn the tide back toward a recognition of Shakespeare's extraordinary ability to create the illusion of complexly motivated human beings.

⁴I'm not sure that I fully understand what Schafer means by ordinary forgiveness—as opposed to the “waiving of forgiveness”—so I've partly intuited this definition.

to highlight the similarities—and the differences—between their approaches. Both rely on a Kleinian model, yet Akhtar's position is fairly optimistic, whereas Schafer remains skeptical.

Akhtar, following the Kleinian model, assumes that “the metabolism of aggression in the crucible of the mother-infant dyad lies at the root of forgiveness versus vengeance. If the aggression is well metabolized and love predominates in the relationship, forgiveness can be experienced and identified with” (p. 187). Later he states, even more affirmatively, that “one thing appears certain from the material covered in this essay: forgiveness is an integral element of mourning, and is therefore necessary for psychic growth. Forgiving others for their hurtful actions and forgiving oneself for having caused pain to others are crucial to moving on in life and to opening oneself for new experiences. An inability or unwillingness to forgive keeps one tied to the past and impedes development” (p. 206). In other words, forgiveness is not only possible, but also a sign of psychic health.

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Schafer's view—to judge by his reading of Cordelia—is more qualified. With great sensitivity, he imagines a young woman loving her father, yet on the verge of leaving him for a new life, and also aware of the treachery of her sisters. Cordelia is not just a “good girl,” as many critics have portrayed her. Rather, she speaks her opening lines from a position of integrity, leavened perhaps by feelings of disappointment in her father's foolishness and her anger against her sisters. Her responses, he says, are “intended to convey both considerable depth of concern for Lear and fidelity to herself.” Cordelia is caught in a no-win situation. If she speaks like her sisters, she will be untrue to herself, yet if she speaks from the heart, she will lose not only her patrimony, but also her father's love. Lear's response is extreme and perhaps beyond her imagining. Yet she does not react in kind, and later, when she returns from banishment, she appears to “waive” the question of forgiveness.

Schafer credits the truthfulness of Cordelia's “no cause,” attributing it, in part, to her achievement of a new developmental phase. She, after all, inherits a kingdom of her own by marrying the suitor who most deserves her. When she returns to England to rescue her father, she leads her own army. She's no longer merely a daughter, but a sovereign and a woman in her own right. From this perspective she perceives her father's faults in a new way. No longer dependent on his love or approval, she can view his fallen condition with compassion. Up

until this point, Schafer would seem to be in agreement with Akhtar's optimistic reading of the reality and viability of forgiveness. But he takes us one step further.

Viewing Cordelia from the vantage point of an experienced clinician, Schafer injects a note of doubt into the purity of her motives. "As an analyst," he tells us, he can only assume that "notwithstanding her poise and understanding" in the face of her sisters' duplicity (I.i) she does "not know her heart well enough" to express herself fully. Instead, Schafer reminds us, Cordelia must have harbored feelings of betrayal, anger, and hurt. Her terse "Nothing" (I.i.89) in response to Lear's corrupt question "Which of you shall we say doth love us most[?]" (I.i.52) suggests that at least on an unconscious level Cordelia intends to humiliate him. It is even possible that she means to provoke her irascible father to anger in order to dissociate herself from her own outraged feelings. All of this makes good psychological sense, though Schafer acknowledges that "the lines that would support this conjecture are not there in the play, and there is no reason to think Shakespeare consciously intended this meaning." Furthermore, Schafer imagines that a woman in Cordelia's shoes—who effectively abandons her father to her sharklike sisters—would feel guilt about the consequences of her words. In attempting to deal with her ambivalence about leaving her father's house for that of her prospective husband, Cordelia takes an absolutist stance that belies the actual complexity of her feelings—feelings that will return to haunt her.

At this point, it is clear that we have left the world of the play insofar as we are able to know Cordelia through her words and actions (since she is largely absent from the unfolding of the main plot); yet we have entered another, even more interesting realm, which is that of Shakespearean tragedy as Schafer conceives it. In such a realm, we do not experience a catharsis in Aristotelian terms—a purgation of pity and terror—but rather a more complex condition, in which feelings of fear, sadness, horror, and compassion are inextricably mixed. In such a condition we are compelled to "view things simultaneously from several perspectives." For Schafer, this is also the state of awareness one achieves at the conclusion of a successful analysis. In other words, there are no simple verities or "happy endings" in Shakespeare, psychoanalysis, or life. From this point of view, Akhtar's portrayal of the dynamics of forgiveness can only seem hopeful, if not unrealistic.

In an essay titled “The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality,” where he considers the comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic aspects of the psychoanalytic outlook, Schafer (1976) offers the following reflection: “It has been said, ‘Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner.’ That easy way out is not in the spirit of analysis as it is not a part of the tragic sense of life” (p. 43). In “Cordelia, Lear, and Forgiveness,” he goes further to claim that “in relation to serious abuse, it is not possible to waive forgiveness totally or to be entirely forgiving. Unconsciously, the talion law prevails; violence breeds violence; revenge is sweet; memory is long; and reflex-like retaliation needs no justification.” While higher ego functioning may diffuse or mitigate such angry or vengeful feelings, they do not entirely disappear. Hence, Cordelia’s “no cause” may represent her conscious desire to comfort her father in the face of his obvious distress, but we may expect her to remain, on some level, “disappointed, hurt, angry, and unforgiving.”

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For Schafer, Cordelia’s dilemma, including her choice to exonerate her father, distills something essential not only to his experience of Shakespearean tragedy, but also to his experience of psychoanalysis, where there are no simple truths, no unmixed emotions, and no unambivalent outcomes. There is real gain in terms of maturation, but the suffering incurred along the way is also real and leaves its residue. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the heroes characteristically pay for this kind of hard-won understanding with their lives. In psychoanalysis, presumably, the analysand emerges, saddened and subdued, but with a hopeful investment in life yet to be lived.

I am very much in sympathy with Schafer’s reading of Cordelia—mainly because I am disappointed in Shakespeare’s portrayal of women in the tragedies, who seem like caricatures to me (either extremely good or extremely bad), in contrast to the rich and varied sensibility that he attributes to his tragic heroes. Schafer has imagined a correspondingly complex inner life for Cordelia. Yet I don’t entirely believe it. I think Schafer has done more than Shakespeare has to create a rationale for Cordelia’s behavior—so harsh in the beginning, yet so relenting in the end.

At the same time, I’m not sure it really matters whether Schafer’s imagination of Cordelia makes sense in terms of what Shakespeare might have intended. Rather, I think he makes a case for the ongoing nature of ambivalence in mature human relationships. I think he is right about this, but I also want to register a mild caveat on the question of forgiveness.

One of the challenges of Schafer's essay is that it made me think hard about forgiveness or, to be more precise, what he calls the "waiving of forgiveness." I did my best to examine my own experience in this regard. While one part of me assents to Akhtar's view that it's better, overall, to forgive, another part of me acknowledges Schafer's point about the residual effects of hurt, resentment, and the desire for restitution. Both positions are important, and I can recall instances in my own life where both have felt relevant. Yet, were I to find myself in Cordelia's shoes, I'd want to be able to choose as she did.

Why? The only way I can respond to this question is by telling a story—not about my own capacity for forgiveness, but about the effects on me of being forgiven.

My awakening to the possible meanings of forgiveness comes from an unanticipated and rather unlikely source—my former mother-in-law. In order to explain, I will need to provide a little background.

I had separated from my first husband in the mid 1970s, when I was in my early thirties and just beginning to come to terms with a childhood legacy that included the death by drowning of my father when I was nine years old.⁵ The ferment and unrest in the country at large, as a result of the civil rights, antiwar, and women's rights movements, seemed to mirror the turbulence and possibilities for transformation that I felt within. My marriage was one of the casualties of this process.

While I remained on cordial terms with my former in-laws after my divorce, we did not have much personal contact unless there was a question of travel involving my daughter, their much-loved grandchild. As time passed, both my ex-husband and I remarried, and life settled into new routines. Then, in my early fifties, my life entered a new phase of disruption, as I struggled to deal, once again, with the trauma of my father's death. My second marriage ended rather abruptly, and a couple of years later my mother died.

During this period of time, my daughter—by now fully grown, graduated from college, and living at a distance from me—had been urging me to visit her paternal grandmother, now widowed and physically disabled. We planned a trip, coordinated from Minneapolis (where I live) and New York (where my daughter lives) to Texas (where her

⁵I've written about this history at length in *Crying at the Movies: A Film Memoir* (Sprengnether 2002).

grandmother resided). As it happened, this visit, planned months in advance, took place the weekend after my mother's death. So it was that in late 1998, just a few days before Thanksgiving, my daughter and I met in St. Louis to bury my mother, then met again the following weekend in Texas—a place I hadn't been in over thirty years—to visit her other grandmother.

It was as if I had never left. My mother-in-law received me with warmth and pleasure, inviting many of her extended family to drop by and greet me while I was there. Over the course of the weekend, I saw both of my ex-husband's siblings, in addition to his favorite first cousin and her mother, a niece and nephew, and a long-term friend of the family. No one seemed surprised by my presence, and (needless to say) no one mentioned the divorce. My mother-in-law set the tone for everyone who came by to say hello. Many times she told me how happy she was to see me and that she'd love for me to visit any time, whether I came with my daughter or by myself.

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In the wake of my own mother's death, I was extremely moved by my mother-in-law's generosity. Nothing required her to behave as she did; if anything, she had plenty of reasons to push me away. Though trouble had been brewing in my first marriage long before the breakup, I was the one who had precipitated the crisis that led to divorce. From her point of view, I might well have appeared the "villain." Yet her behavior toward me was gracious and loving. In Schafer's terms, it would seem that she had gone beyond the issue of blame and had "waived" or transcended the question of forgiveness—as if she had answered my silent query with her own "No cause, no cause."

Some time later, I began to make connections I had been too young to reflect on in my twenties when we had first met. My mother-in-law had had a childhood quite different from mine, yet equally complex. Both of her parents had been widowed and had had children before they married. She was the first child of this second union. As a result, she grew up with half-siblings on both her mother's and her father's sides of the family, as well as full siblings from her parents' union. In addition, her father died when she was about fourteen, which meant that she had many adult responsibilities thrust upon her in an abrupt way. Not only did she care for her younger siblings while her mother sought work outside the home, but she herself went to work to help the family at a relatively early age.

Suddenly, it dawned on me. Perhaps the bond I had always felt with her had something to do with our mutual experience of family hardship and loss.

Now I began to think about something I had sensed, yet not known how to describe, about my mother-in-law. Perhaps she had seen in me some version of herself and hence had chosen to bond with me, regardless of my quixotic behavior. Perhaps we had recognized each other, despite the overt differences between us. Whereas she had been a homemaker in a relatively conservative Southern community, I had pursued a Ph.D. and a professional career in the Northeast and Upper Midwest. Nonetheless, each of us had had to cope with the pain and disruption of parental loss.

We never said any of these things to each other. Yet I began to feel a resonance between us that I could not account for in any other way. Why else would she be so kind to me? Why else would I feel so moved by her way of being in the world—so clearly contrasted with mine? I could, of course, be wrong about any or all of these things. Perhaps there were other forces in my mother-in-law's life or character that would help to explain her open-hearted welcome. What I know without doubt is that I was its beneficiary.

For the next five years, I visited her regularly with my daughter, once even attending a full family reunion to help celebrate her ninetieth birthday. Over this period of time, I began to feel a subtle inner change. From having focused on the sources of difficulty or sorrow in my life, I began to take more notice of the occasions of pleasure or gratification. I had gotten used to thinking of myself as unlucky—sick with rheumatic fever as a child and orphaned by my father's death, leading a somewhat lonely single life in late middle age. But now I began to observe how many good things I enjoyed: my education, gratifying work and financial independence, my closeness with my daughter and pleasure in her company, my strong network of men and women friends. While I can't say that I owe this shift of attention entirely to the influence of my mother-in-law, I am sure that the example of her generosity, including her acceptance of what her own life had to offer, affected me.

In the last five years of her life, my mother-in-law was nearly immobile and in constant discomfort, if not active pain. Yet she was always glad to see me, thanking me to the point of embarrassment and doing everything she could to make me feel at home. She knew my history, many parts of which she undoubtedly had reservations about,

yet she never found fault with me or expressed a negative judgment. She said that she loved me, and I believed her.

Having missed out on the feeling of being approved of by my own mother, I was grateful for my former mother-in-law's seemingly unconditional acceptance. While I am sure that her feelings about me were complex, the emotion that won out and found most consistent expression toward me was love.

How do we describe such unexpected, late-life blessings in psychoanalytic terms? Perhaps this is one of those places of enigma—where we are tempted to turn away from theory or abstraction toward literature.

What we know about Shakespeare is that he moved away from tragedy toward another manner of writing before he retired from the stage. In his late “romances,” he seems preoccupied with disruptions of families and how to repair them. These dramas typically cross generations, reaching past their heroes' obsessions with political power or sexual jealousy toward the more elusive goal of reconstituting family ties. In *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare explores what it means to absorb and move past the tragic emotions that precipitate civil and domestic chaos.

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These plays, like mature fairy tales, examine another set of alternatives. What if Desdemona had not died and Othello had had an opportunity to reflect on his rash course of action, as has Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*? What if Macbeth had had a chance to rue his pursuit of absolute power, as has Antonio in *The Tempest*? What if Hamlet—or Lear or Antony—had understood who truly loved him, as does Posthumus Leonatus in *Cymbeline*? What if anyone who had made a really bad mistake had had a second chance?

However much we are moved by tragedy as a literary form, we don't want to live—if we can help it—in the tragic mode. Yet we all make mistakes, some of which seem irremediable. How do we cope with our awareness of the people we have hurt or the wrongs we have done over the course of a long life? In *King Lear*, I believe, Shakespeare was attempting to address this question through Cordelia's seemingly unmotivated act of forgiveness. Lear's recovery of his sanity, his recognition of his daughter's true worth, his eventual ability to mourn her loss all stem from this turning point. Her words of absolute release in him his full capacity for love, as poignantly expressed in his “Come, let's away to prison” speech, where he invites Cordelia to relinquish the cares of the world and join him in contemplating “the

mystery of things” as if they were “God’s spies” (V.iii.8–17). Shakespeare writes, in this respect, more from the perspective of the forgiven than of the forgiver—as Schafer rightly observes in his analysis of Cordelia’s possible motives. Yet, as someone who has felt the effects of having been forgiven, I want to validate the hope contained in the ideal she represents.

Schafer’s meditation on this subject raises one final question for me—one having to do with the degree to which we associate the qualities necessary for forgiveness with women. Akhtar attributes the development of the capacity for forgiveness to the quality of the mother-infant relationship. It is the mother who contains and “mentalizes” the infant’s alternating feelings of love and hate, ultimately offering an example of how to construct a complex inner world. A “good-enough” mother, to borrow Winnicott’s phrase, can survive her baby’s expressions of frustration, anger, or despair without retaliation, thus setting in motion the baby’s future capacity not only to tolerate but also to integrate such painful states of being. As a result, women (specifically, mothers) seem to offer a paradigm for the kind of emotional balance that is necessary for forgiveness. Akhtar himself muses: “Women’s deeper capacities for commitment in love relations . . . and for making context-based decisions in the moral sphere . . . suggest that they might possess a greater capacity for forgiveness than do men” (p. 204). Indeed, Shakespeare intimates as much in his late romances, where he relies on smart daughters (Imogen, Miranda, Perdita) and forgiving older women (Paulina, Hermione) to redeem his tragic universe. Even Freud seems to have relied on a beloved daughter (whom he associated with Cordelia) to relieve the sufferings of his old age.⁶

I wonder if we ask too much of mothers—and daughters—in this regard. At the same time, I am aware that my own example of

⁶Freud, in his premarital correspondence with Martha refers to her as “Cordelia-Martyr”—ostensibly to describe their closeness, but also to hint at her manner of cool reserve. His friend Breuer, he reveals, also “calls his wife by that name because she is incapable of displaying affection to others, even including her own father” (E. Freud 1975, pp. 40–41). Later in life, he cast his daughter Anna in the role of the loving and devoted Cordelia. In a letter to his friend Ferenczi, Freud describes his daughter Anna as his “closest companion,” identifying her as the “subjective condition for the ‘Choice of the Three Caskets’”—where he associates the lead casket chosen by Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* with Cordelia (Freud 1913; E. Freud 1975, p. 301). The extent to which Freud was dependent on Anna’s “kind nursery” (*King Lear* I.i.124) is evident from the account of his personal physician, Max Schur (1972).

forgiveness lies along the mother-daughter axis. Am I contributing to Akhtar's assumption that women forgive better than men?

As I write this essay, moreover, I am conscious of a new set of considerations, as a result of the birth of my first grandchild. Observing my daughter care for her baby, I feel gratified by how easy and "natural" a mother she appears to be. At the same time, I hear her talk about the anxiety she feels as a new mother: about caring for an infant (how to soothe, diaper, bathe); about breast-feeding (well enough, long enough); about hiring a part-time nanny (when and for how many hours a day). "I was prepared to love her," she says, "but what I wasn't prepared for was all this guilt."

On the one hand, I am deeply gratified to see how well my daughter is adapting to motherhood—much better, I feel, than I did when I first mothered her. On the other hand, I worry over the degree to which our culture assumes that women are responsible for the nature of the inner world a child constructs. In my own case, I had a father (for at least nine years) who held me, played with me, and comforted me as much, if not more than, my reserved and distracted mother. I have also observed my son-in-law's tenderness toward his infant daughter. Surely men also play a significant role in the way that children imagine and construct their sense of inner reality. In other words, the breast—while powerful and significant as a real and fantasy object—is not all.

For this reason, I am particularly grateful for Schafer's unsentimental analysis of Cordelia's relationship with her father. Above all, Schafer does not fall into the trap of idealization, assuming that Cordelia is predisposed, as a woman, to forgive. Rather, like a contemporary playwright, he considers how such a woman might actually behave, in the light of what he understands about the complexity of female subjectivity. Schafer supplies what Shakespeare may have lacked—insight into the world of mixed emotions of mature women, in which they may experience varying degrees of ambivalence, yet remain capable of knowing—and choosing—what and whom to forgive.

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