



Curse and consequence: King Lear's destructive narcissism

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Shock, pain and antipathy are common audience responses to King Lear's violent abuse of Cordelia in Scene 1 of King Lear; however, the play then shifts so rapidly to other dramatic relationships and events that it tends to push these feelings out of mind. This shift is here regarded as a seduction to repress the fear and antipathy aroused by Lear. This effect opens the way to sympathetic identification with him in his subsequent humiliation, suffering and madness. These contrasting responses help build a tragic structure in which a more complex Lear becomes the victim of his curse on Cordelia. The seductive design resembles efforts by analytic patients to induce the analyst into repressively neglecting significant aspects of transference that require analytic attention. And Lear's bearing the consequences of his curse is likened to aspects of the decompensations of severely narcissistic patients. Additionally, to the extent that the audience has unconsciously identified with Lear's violence and participated emotionally in other painful scenes, as is likely to be the case, it has been unconsciously reacting as well with guilt and depressive anxiety. These reactions increase readiness to be diverted from destructive narcissism and responses to it.

Keywords: audience response, countertransference, defense, depressive anxiety, destructive narcissism, identification, repression

This essay, centered on Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Fraser, 1998), interweaves two themes that bear on major clinical issues. The first is patients' defensive efforts to get the analyst to forget or be blind to significant material. *King Lear's* lengthy first act is analyzed as including an attempt to exert repressive control of the audience response to Lear's initial display of destructive narcissism. Lear has displayed this narcissism after Cordelia refused to deliver before his assembled royal court an extravagant declaration of love for him: he had hastily laid a murderous curse on her, his only truly loving daughter and the one he claims to love the most. In his rage, he disclaimed his paternity and banished her without royal identity and rights, protection or means of survival, a curse which, if fulfilled, would destroy her. Secondly, this essay examines the rebound effects of Lear's narcissism, specifically its destructive consequences in his internal and external worlds. Analysts encounter these rebound effects in severely narcissistic patients when their grandiose postures prove brittle, their enviousness brings retaliation and isolation, their unconscious feelings of deprivation, worth-

lessness and needfulness rise to the surface, and depression presses in on them (on destructive narcissism, see Britton [2000]).

Previous psychoanalytic and non-analytic studies of the play have examined it from every conceivable angle. An Addendum to my text which surveys outstanding discussions of the play also includes my comments on some that have already explored Lear's narcissism as well as other topics to be taken up in what follows. The body of this essay remains focused on what appear to be the dynamics of the play's engagement of its audience; specifically, how, from the first, the audience is to be drawn into a complex emotional position by first witnessing Lear's attack on his daughter (and subsequently, on his other, also destructively narcissistic daughters, Goneril and Regan, and also on Gloucester, a kindly member of his court who is tragically suffering from the destructive narcissism at play within his own family) and then virtually flooded with new, emotionally intense material.

Drawing on the contemporary Kleinian conception of human beings' basic response tendencies, it is argued that members of the audience are bound to participate emotionally in these attacks through the varied identifications they make under the influence of their own conflicted relations with personal narcissistic-sadistic tendencies. This emotional participation mirrors the identifications, defenses, feelings of aggression, love, and guilt, and depressive anxiety that often enter prominently into the interplay of transference and countertransference in the clinical relationship. They do, of course, vary in content, intensity, and degree of awareness from one viewer to the next.

Method

Although I highlight certain prominent aspects of Lear's personality, I have not aimed to formulate the rounded, integrated, clinical analysis of Lear that one might attempt after a lengthy professional consultation or an extended personal analysis. Instead, I have described what I take to be a common line of audience response to a predominant aspect of the play as it has been conventionally presented and reported. In this respect I follow a well-established tradition, one that can be found described or implied in the writings of some notable Shakespearean, literary and philosophical scholars (for example, Adelman, 1992; Bloom, 1998; Bradley, 1904; Cavell, 2003; Eagleton, 2003; Fraser, 1998; Frye, 1967; Garber, 2004; Kermode, 2000; Mack, 1965; Schwartz, 1980; Simon, 1988; Williams, 1966).

These background references reflect not only direct experience and cultural awareness but also contemplation of the eloquent, inventive language Shakespeare used to portray character, action and event. On the clinical side, I have drawn on many widely accepted analytic insights into the place of violence in the internal worlds of human beings. When combined, these responses are not entirely free of ambiguity; nevertheless, they do provide sufficient basis for generalizations about common audience response.

Of special note is the fact that, in one form or another, these generalizations have constituted the core of our discipline from the time of Freud's first clinical and applied analyses. In that position, they function as a form

of thought. These organizing concepts based on core propositions about human development and responsiveness are necessary tools for clinical observation, understanding and intervention. They do not so much require evidence as help us develop evidence for specific interpretations. In this regard, one might recall Freud's remark *à propos* observation of infantile psychosexuality: "Enough can be seen in children if one knows how to look" (Freud, 1933, p. 121).

Over the years, of course, new and revised modes of observing/understanding have been proposed, elaborated, applied and accepted; for example, those advanced by Melanie Klein and her adherents, by mid-20th century Freudian ego psychologists, and by Heinz Kohut and his self psychological adherents. Although some generalizations have been changed to conform to these varied and in some respects competing developments, they have not lost their place and function at the core. At each core are broad portrayals of what we basically regard as human nature; these portrayals are the universals behind the particulars of each psychoanalytic investigation and its conclusions. The individual variations we encounter clinically do not ordinarily throw these universals into question; rather, they are usually included in the list of varied expression of these universals; however, some of them have led to fruitful changes at the core. Such has been the history, for example, of the Oedipus complex and its relation to pre-oedipal issues.

In the instance of *King Lear*, there is no Lear to 'get right.' Lear is a creature of the theater. He is what the audience makes of him as he seems in the text and as presented on stage. However, it must be granted that, to a noteworthy extent, control of that creation is shared with other factors, among which tradition and current convention stand out. For instance, many viewers are prepared to think of this play as primarily an enactment of tragedies of power within the family or within the state; alternatively, as an enactment of Lear's 'redemption,' his acknowledging of his humanity; or as showing the absurdity of life in an indifferent and often cruel universe, as was the trend during the mid-20th century heyday of popularized existentialism. In postmodern perspective, the play seems a bitter commentary on the centrality of destructiveness – some say 'evil' – in this world. Mixtures of the views are also common. Notwithstanding these variations, an audience tendency seems to have persisted to finally follow the lead of Kent, Lear's devoted courtier, and that of the wise Fool, in thinking consciously of Lear as a noble king who, out of an excess of vanity and increasing anxiety about aging and death, has rashly divested himself of power and perpetrated unwarranted abuse and rejection; he is a king who, for Kent, returns to his greatness of spirit only after a painful odyssey through humiliation and madness.

This said, it seems necessary to point out that insufficient attention has been paid to Lear's sharp-eyed destructive narcissism as shown in his initial explosive violence. It is not being claimed that this trait has gone unrecognized; nor that it ever need be utterly absent from mind of the audience: rather, that it is warranted to pursue further detailed analysis of the extraordinary animosity and thoroughness of Lear's curses and their immediate and long-term implications and consequences along with further analysis of

audience response to these developments. Lear's curses and their consequences are two of the armatures around which the play is built. They are crucial to what, in the public's and critics' discussions, have been referred to as the most heartrending scenes of the play: in addition to Lear's mad meeting with blinded Gloucester, there is Lear's reunion with Cordelia during which he acknowledges his injustice, offers up his life as punishment, and receives her forgiving words:

Lear: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith, I pray, weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

(IV. vii. 71–2)

Cordelia: No cause, no cause

(IV. vii. 75 – on her forgiveness, see Schafer, 2005)

The third such scene is Lear's final entrance with dead Cordelia in his arms (V. iii).

General approach

I dwell first on the dynamics of what I take to be common audience response to Lear's brutal attack on Cordelia. I argue that, by playing on audience members' own anxieties and guilt, the play exerts a repressive influence which, when successful, blinds them to the repercussions in their inner worlds of their having been witness to Lear's extended, eloquent and cruel attack. Their susceptibility stems in part from their having unconsciously identified with Lear in his violent aspect and felt his excitement. As the play continues, however, the audience will be influenced, unconsciously and consciously, to develop a many-sided, conflictual identification with both Lear and Cordelia, and finally with a merged version of the two of them.

Along with suffering external damage, an attacker such as Lear will be exposed to suffering serious internal consequences, consequences that are all the more damaging when, as in his case, the victim is loved or depended on and when the violence, no matter whether implicit or explicit, is lethal, certainly spiritually and potentially physically. Anyone laboring psychically, under these conditions, as Lear is, will find it painful in the extreme to move away from the grandiosity and persecutory anxiety of the paranoid–schizoid position; for to move then toward awareness of one's destructiveness is felt to be a move toward damnation: the extreme guilt, self-punishment, bottomless loss of self-esteem of melancholia and madness. Analytically, following Freud and Klein, we understand these penalties to be directed at the ambivalently regarded internalized object merged with a dominant version of the narcissist's self. During the psychoanalytic process, it becomes evident that one can only dread entering the depressive position. On the basis of acute depressive anxiety, analysts will go to great lengths to forestall that movement. They erect and maintain rigid defenses against full collaboration that might lead to insight. Depressive anxiety and defense seem to be crucial issues for King Lear and for the audience relationship both to him and themselves in their unconscious excitement.

Thus, through much of the play, Lear resists forward movement toward self-recognition and the remorse it entails. As he suffers, he continues to rant against his being persecuted by his daughters and those in their employ or under their influence. Even when he begins to develop insight into his guilt, he continues these complaints against the world – remaining, in his words, “more sinned against than sinning” (III. ii. 58–9). This persistence implies that defenses against intense depressive anxiety are keeping him entrenched in the paranoid–schizoid position. His emotional position is a correlate of the destructive narcissism he manifested in his attack on Cordelia. The consequences of depressive anxiety and the defenses against it figure significantly in all that follows Lear’s violence in Act I, Scene 1. Under ‘all that follows’ I include the audience’s conflicted emotional experiences as the play progresses.

The seduction to repress

Some clinical blind spots can be attributed to such built-in epistemological factors as the limits on insight and inclusiveness imposed by adhering to a specific systematic point of view. Other blind spots manifest clinicians’ normal and pathological countertransferences. Still others are precipitated by the momentary dynamic interaction of the two participants; among these are many that are results of what I designate the seduction to repress.

This seduction can be said to enter into, for example, the ‘Monday crust.’ The Monday crust was Freud’s name for the analysand’s initial *analytic* unproductiveness after a weekend’s separation (Freud, 1913, p. 127). In this context, Freud emphasized primarily the regrouping of resistance during the intervening break. This ‘crust’ can, however, be understood as having much greater and situation-specific clinical significance than that quantitative shift. A common form of this crust is Monday’s hurried, detailed, psychologically unreflective report of the weekend’s comings and goings, surprises and disasters, persons and places, any one of which might entice the analyst to take an exclusive interest in it and lose sight of indications that the analysand is avoiding the experience of excited or reproachful re-entry. These aspects pertain to conflicted dependency, rejection, punishment and triangulation of relationship, all of which have deep and more or less painful sources in infantile unconscious mental processes and are tied to the transferences of the moment in important ways.

The analyst who has been diverted by this defensive tactic will have been seduced into repression, perhaps not deep or enduring repression, perhaps only the repression that divides the Conscious and Preconscious, and a wavering one at that, but repression in any case. Discovering the successful seduction, the analyst is likely to react with chagrin and self-criticism for participating in an enactment, and sometimes with a wish to strike back at the analysand with a sharp-edged interpretation or resentful silence, in that way extending the enactment.

Understood in this larger sense, the Monday crust takes its place as one among numerous seductions to repress during the course of analysis. For analysands steadily use defenses and evoke countertransferences designed to

lead their analysts away from painful though potentially transformative insights (though, in the end, the analysis of these defensive strategies and evocations does prove to be a powerful instrument of insight and change). Thus, it is by no means unusual for the analyst to find that, for some time, the analysand has been using one or another defensive technique to keep her interest and concern elsewhere than on the aggression, masochism, sexualization, fear of dependency, shame, guilt, and the many powerful and subtle defenses against them, that define the core transference issues. The occasion of each seduction to repress will be determined by the disturbing unconscious fantasies that give meaning to the interaction. Such is the case, for instance, when the analysand experiences any act of interpretation as an abusive form of criticism and tries to affect the analyst's countertransference accordingly.

Knowing that unconscious activity often poses as passive victimization, one can assume that the audience is not innocent in succumbing to this oppressive influence on attention and remembering. It is partly responsible for the successful seduction to forget. Unconsciously, it has collusively participated in being distracted from the cruelty of the curse Lear has unloaded on his daughter. Its collusion stems in part from its desire to avoid pained empathic and guilty responses to being witness to this attack and partially identified with its perpetrator – its depressive anxiety. It is not only that its members are witnesses through their imaginative entry into the play's emotionality; they mostly know or remember what is coming, that is, they have knowingly paid to witness with excitement a play that is known to feature so much cruelty and suffering (further on this point below).

In clinical practice, analysts' defensive struggles often play a recognizable part in those occasions when they discover that they have been missing signs of sadism in the analysand's mode of relating. There are moments when they might have needed to collaborate with the analysand's defenses by listening away from destructive narcissism, away from their unwelcome identification with the analysand's cruel self. That listening away might, for example, lead into untimely emphasis on erotic themes or themes of gratitude or into matters outside the consulting room such as family situations in the past or relationships with others.

The course of the play

In order to highlight these seductions and their strategic consequences in the interaction of Shakespeare's play and its audience, it is necessary to focus first on the speed with which members of the audience can begin to forget Lear's terrible abuse of Cordelia in Act I, Scene 1. This superficial repression can remain in place through the many fully peopled and gripping scenes that follow. As already mentioned, its effect is not made plain until the climactic moment in Act IV, Scene 7 when Lear and Cordelia are reunited and the audience is flooded with tragic feeling.

In the first scene of *King Lear*, the aged king lays his murderous curse on his daughter, Cordelia. Before Cordelia took her fateful turn in Lear's self-centered love scene, her two older sisters, Goneril and Regan, had already

delivered their insincere and extravagant declarations of total love. Thereupon, each had been granted a promised third of the kingdom that Lear said he was giving up as a bow to his aging and his looking forward to rest. He had, however, specified – in vain, as it turns out – that he was to retain his title, his majestic powers and his train of knights. Cordelia's speech was to be the final public prelude to his bestowing on her, also as her dowry, the choice third of his kingdom. Her two suitors were waiting in the wings for this ceremony to be concluded and the way cleared for their declarations of intent and her choice of one of them for husband.

When Cordelia disappoints Lear, he pours out his torrential curse, some of it during his row with Kent, who is trying to check Lear's wrath and call him to his senses. To Cordelia:

Lear: Let it be so, thy truth be thy dower.
 For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
 The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
 By all the operation of the orbs
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
 Propinquity and property of blood,
 And as a stranger to my heart and me
 Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarian Scythian,
 Or he that makes his generation messes
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
 Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved
 As thou my sometime daughter.
Kent: Good my liege –
Lear: Peace, Kent!
 Come not between the Dragon and his wrath.
 I loved her most, and sought to set my rest
 On her kind nursery. Hence and avoid my sight!
 So be my grave my peace, as here I give
 Her father's heart from her!

(I. i. 110–28)

Then, after dividing Cordelia's dowry and his powers into two for his 'two daughters' and in the midst of again pushing aside Kent's protests, Lear adds:

Lear: The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.

(I. i. 44)

and later, when confronting her two suitors, he goes further by seeking to destroy her future prospects:

Lear: Will you with those infirmities she owes,
 Unfriended, new adopted to our hate,
 Dowr'ed with our curse, and strangered with our oath,
 Take her, or leave her?

(I. i. 204–7)

and:

Lear: T' avert your liking a more worthier way
 Than on a wretch whom nature is ashamed
 Almost t' acknowledge hers.

(I. i. 212–14)

When pulled together, his curse reads: *Nature is ashamed to acknowledge the hateful wretch you are. It were better you had never been born. I disown you and deny you your dowry, my grace, blessing and love. I want never to see your face again. I send you out in the world friendless, without status, property or country. Henceforth, I will be to you as a stranger, a dragon or an eager huntsman, trying to destroy your prospects, if not you yourself.*

Further, Lear is portrayed as then remaining deaf to Cordelia's attempts to explain her withholding the demanded speech. He is unresponsive to her saying that it is not her way to be hypocritical like her sisters and pledge all her love when half is appropriately reserved for her future husband, and he is equally deaf to her indicating that, in taking her stand, she is showing creative self-interest with regard to her evolving status as an autonomous woman moving into the next major phase of her life as wife and queen. She is far from being simply the provocative daughter or the daughter whose limited powers of expression are further reduced as she listens to the lavish speeches of her sisters – the conception of her featured in many critical writings on, and theatrical production of, the play (see Addendum). Following her 'Nothing,' the play shows her to be an active, articulate advocate of her interests, a perceptive critic of her sisters, and implicitly, an eager protector of her destructive father as well. However, one must include among the exciting factors of this opening scene the perception that the audience too has been inadequately prepared for her initially offering only 'Nothing' when Lear initially asks what she has to say on her behalf; it is likely to be temporarily thrown off balance by her disorienting, and for Lear humiliating, way of beginning to make her legitimate claims for herself. It is, I think, safe to assume that a truly loving daughter, already established as his favorite, would, in addition to her concern, resent the demand being made on her and would not entirely contain her antagonism. In part, Cordelia can be understood to be acting out this resentment with her provocative 'Nothing.' In her conflicted position, she could have momentarily lost her grip.

Although Lear claims that he has always loved Cordelia most and, in implicit recognition of her love and tenderness, has planned to spend his retirement in her care, he gives no sign of the restraining or softening influence of love or remorse. In their place is an articulate and thorough hatefulness. Nor is there a trace of his recognizing the cold hostility of Goneril and Regan. Deaf to Cordelia, apparently blind to his other daughters' sinister intentions, and indiscriminately violent in his rage, Lear stands exposed as utterly narcissistic. He seems so vain, self-absorbed, hard to reach, easily humiliated and reactively destructive a father that one is compelled to doubt the scope and depth of his capacity for love. His kind of love cannot be counted on.

That Lear's violent reaction to his disappointment is fraught with intense unacknowledged anxiety is suggested by his earlier description of his aging

self as engaged in a “crawl toward death” (I. i. 43). That anxiety would contribute to his outburst’s intensity; what we cannot grant is that this anxiety adequately explains the nature of his reaction. Anxiety can trigger expressions of destructive narcissism but it does not create them.

Because Lear’s attack on Cordelia happens so soon, the audience has been given little chance to integrate its identification with her as the worthy but abused child. Nevertheless, it cannot escape the impact of witnessing a cruel father battering his devoted daughter; defensively, however, it can allow itself to be diverted from its shocked reaction by the rush of dramatic material that introduces other characters and plot lines.

Even after one takes into account that all the early introductory material that follows this explosion seems designed to help launch this complex dramatic play, and while one bears in mind as well that the play’s title announces that it is to be a play centered on Lear, one can still maintain that these developments and characters will shift the audience’s awareness away from its inevitably pained and irate response to Lear’s curse. It is induced to feel that, if it lingers over Cordelia and its feelings for her, it will not be able to keep up with the play. As indicated earlier, this response is analogous in certain respects to that of the clinician who feels pressured to ‘stay with it’ upon being confronted by the rush of ‘interesting,’ ‘exciting,’ or ‘alarming’ news reports that patients introduce to help them avoid ideas and affects pertaining to the immediate moment in the analysis, such as reunion or impending separation.

Shortly after the explosive banishment, the audience witnesses the influential dramatic move of good France promptly questioning Lear’s denunciation of Cordelia, his ignoring her having been disinherited, and his choosing her to be his queen. In this respect, it is quickly being reassured about Cordelia’s future. This cushion against the impact of Lear’s curse frees it to move on with the rapidly developing play. Also, in the midst of the attack on Cordelia, Lear quarrels with, and banishes, Kent, his devoted subject and Cordelia’s defender. In putting the curse of exile on good Kent, he deprives himself of another supporter and protector. At the same time the audience is being further reassured about Lear’s worthiness by witnessing good Kent’s show of his love and devotion to him. Kent’s persistence, so costly to his own interests, moves one to think more kindly of Lear. Cordelia’s speeches would already have begun to reassure the audience that there is also goodness in Lear. It begins to be concerned with his future as a victim and less mindful of his destructiveness.

The audience is further bent toward Lear by being shown the sisters shrewdly noting the effect of advancing age on a father they know as temperamentally rash and lacking insight into himself. Rightly taking these defects as bad omens for their futures, Goneril and Regan begin to forearm themselves against similar attacks. Witnessing the heartlessness with which Goneril and Regan plan to defend their interests, the audience’s concern for Lear as a defenseless aged king is intensified at the expense of its initial fear and antipathy. This push toward repression goes so far as to enlist the services of abused Cordelia: as she anticipates departing with France, her soon-to-be husband, she thinks neither of Lear’s curse nor of the impending

great changes in her life, but instead of Lear's bleak future with Goneril and Regan, and she speaks up, publicly confronting her sisters with her feelings. In this selfless expression of her devotion to Lear, good Cordelia virtually chains one's sympathies to him.

More inducement to repress follows. The very next scene introduces the audience to three more principle figures – Gloucester and his two sons – whose dysfunctional family dynamics roughly parallel Lear's. This doubling of Lear's situation fosters in the audience another set of disturbing identifications and becomes a third armature in the play's structure. The noted critic, Harold Bloom (1998), dwells on the fortunes of the Gloucester family to the extent of diminishing Cordelia's tragic importance. Be that as it may, for some time the Gloucester family drama pushes the initial curse on Cordelia still further out of mind; nevertheless, by mirroring the Lear family tragedy, it ultimately reinforces the impact of delinquent paternity.

Then, in Act I, Scene 3, one is introduced to the pathos and irony of the Fool and his prophetic taunting of Lear for playing the fool by giving away his estate and power so injudiciously, but not, however, for his cruel renunciation of his loving daughter. Before Act I ends, and for good use later on, the play introduces both Oswald, a courtier in the service of evil Goneril, and Goneril's husband, Albany, whose humane nature Goneril despises.

By its end, Act I has forcefully and speedily laid out three intertwined plot lines: Lear and his daughters; Gloucester and his sons; and the impending and interwoven fates of everyone introduced along the way. It has attempted to shape a sympathetic audience for Lear's world (and also Gloucester's). The drama that follows then keeps the audience fixated on that world of disempowerment and victimization until the heartrending moment of reunion in Act IV, Scene 7. The force of that scene can only derive from one's having continued to reverberate to Lear's murderous curse. Up to that moment, the characters have spoken only of his folly, not his violence. Mainly, the audience has been encouraged to love Lear and to suffer with him. It has been more or less pulled away from its initial shock, horror, and reactive rage and has been embroiled in the sufferings of a man, a father and a king who, although he is difficult to love and is the victim of his own destructiveness, has been treated with unbearable cruelty.

The shocking violence of the curse virtually guarantees that, unconsciously, the audience would continue to feel its impact as it traveled through the play's jungle of betrayal, suffering, loss, despair and madness. By the time of the reunion, the meanings of that impact have been greatly enriched. Highlighted once more is one's pained identification with battered Cordelia and, lurking in the background, the reaction against Lear and the identification with both his cruel self with its attendant depressive anxiety. Simultaneously, the play has brought forward Lear's royal and appealing self. One has witnessed Lear's beginning to come to terms with his humanity. This tragic transformations has revealed him to be capable of deep compassion, as in his eloquent soliloquies on the essence of being human during his exposure to the fierce storm in Act III, Scene 4.

This transformation has also shown Lear to be capable of great wit, as in his mad, manic encounter with blinded Gloucester (IV. vi). There, while

hallucinating, Lear can be understood to have been initially incapable of experiencing the shock and painfulness of encountering Gloucester in his horrible state. Falling back on manic defense, he spins brilliant, double-edged lines which allow him to continue reciting his own grievances and simultaneously to use his devoted ally, Gloucester, as a prop to mock his own having been blind to himself and others. As is common in manic defense, he is being cruel to Gloucester even while asserting his growing insight into his destructive effects on others. In conventional critical accounts, mad Lear is only slowly getting to recognize Gloucester, but these accounts do not do justice to Lear's manic remarks on eyes and eyesight. When Gloucester asks Lear if he recognizes him, Lear responds: "I remember thine eyes well enough" – but there are no eyes at all to recognize. Going further, Lear unhesitatingly spins out elaborate variations on the subject of blinded eyes. In one of these variations, like a playwright building a scene, he insists that Gloucester read some writing so that he can then use Gloucester's predictably despondent and helpless response to launch into a mainly self-referential sermon on emotional blindness. We see this same wit when bitter Lear instantly describes Gloucester as "Goneril, with a white beard"; also, when he uses such visual figures of speech as "Dost squinny at me?" and "When I do stare." (See Addendum for more on this.) Despite its manic quality, this brilliant discourse on defect also alerts one to Lear's beginning to shift toward the sanity of lucidity, self-recognition and responsibility. The playwright's inventiveness helps his admiring audience endure the almost unbearable painfulness of this encounter. In contrast to Lear, Gloucester's son, Edgar, responds undefensively to Lear's madness and his father's mutilation and helplessness. He speaks the moment's horror:

Edgar: I would not take this from report; it is,
And my heart breaks at it.

(IV. vi. 143–4)

His words reinforce the play's emphasis on how painful it can be to see what is real – in effect, to live by Freud's all-inclusive Reality Principle.

Increasingly (also in other powerful scenes that I pass over), Lear is being transformed into a whole figure, one not so thoroughly a limited, offensive and pathetic narcissist. He is emerging as an explosive but also engaging and observant figure passing into madness and partially out of it. It becomes comfortable to identify with this Lear-in-transformation. By the time of the reunion in Act IV, Scene 7, one has been prepared to feel both for and with father and daughter and to rejoice in their restored, compassionate togetherness.

And yet, even in the late scenes preceding the end, Lear's guilt and reparation give way to his narcissism. His self-absorption is portrayed once again when, upon realizing that he and Cordelia are prisoners, he promptly spins his phantasy of pleasurable and peaceful (and Olympian) time together observing – as "god's spies" – the rest of the world go about its troubled business. Although his fantasy suggests a wish to comfort Cordelia and includes his repeatedly asking her forgiveness, its spirit is manic:

Lear: Come, let's away to prison:
 We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;
 When thou doth ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies ...

(V. iii. 7–13)

One can be enchanted by the poetry of Lear's lines and fail to register his showing no pained recognition that Cordelia, having a heart and mind and husband of her own, might view their imprisonment very differently and need quite another form of consolation. Lear remains unable to identify with her as a separate, mature person; instead, his words are those of a father comforting his little girl. Thus, the play works against the audience's feeling that a full emotional reunion is possible; it is, however, capable of shifting one pretty far toward believing that, within Lear's limits, psychical reunion can be achieved. My account of this scene is in full accord with that of Charles Hanly (1986).

Curse and consequence

Throughout our experience of the play, we can begin to feel, even if not to know clearly, that Lear has been living out the fate he had wished on Cordelia. The doubling of Lear introduced by the sufferings of Gloucester would already have stimulated a disturbing sense that Lear will be the victim of his own death wish. In his rage at Kent, Lear refers to himself as a hunter leveling his drawn bow at his target:

Lear: The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft

(I. i. 42)

and in all that follows we witness the released arrow's doubling back to pierce the huntsman's heart. Ironically, it is Lear, not Cordelia, who has been rendered homeless, exiled, without protection, subject to every indignity and threat to survival. Lear, who had initially looked forward to peacefully ending his days in Cordelia's good nursery, has instead been suffering the horrible future that he had intended for her. There is no prospect that he will spend his last days in the maternal care of his favorite child. Although he does finally end up in Cordelia's loving care, it is only after having been reduced to a half-demented, ravaged, dying old man soon to be confronted by her death. His final dramatic action – killing the jailor who hanged her – is understandable as a pathetic reparative gesture that cannot undo his responsibility for her death – and soon his own. Only in death are father and daughter fully united, and the audience is simultaneously identified with him, her, and their merged figure. These multiple and merged identifications shape the final audience response to this play.

The audience's identifications

Earlier, I proposed that these identifications can be linked to the anxiety associated with entering the depressive position and that depressive anxiety

plays a significant role in audience response to this great tragedy. As jolted witnesses of the father–daughter confrontation in Act I, one would have wanted to escape the curse’s painful reverberations in the inner world. These reverberations would stem from one’s own readiness to re-experience in current life situations those times in the infantile past when one felt painfully neglected and abused, misunderstood and wrongly condemned, unwanted or at least woefully unappreciated. This readiness is a more or less prominent part of the child self each of us continues to maintain in the internal world. It is a child self that can be self-absorbed, grandiose, violent in feeling and phantasy when disappointed or feeling abandoned: in short, inclined to be a Little King Lear, though usually restrained by feelings of love, dependency, and fearful belief in the omnipotence of wishes, destructive and otherwise. On this basis, an audience is ready to identify with Lear in his imperious rage, but at the same time defensively poised against consciously re-experiencing these narcissistic pains and rages in full force.

The price paid for this escape is losing contact with an important part of one’s humane responsiveness, one aspect of which is inclusive empathy based on compassionate identification. Additionally, one sacrifices something of the human readiness to experience hatred – that which one would feel *toward* Lear and *as* Lear. These sacrifices are not total, for, once unconscious mental processes are taken into account, especially those involved in superego function, we realize that nothing is lost on us; we forget nothing and at bottom forgive nothing. Compassion and hatred are never totally expunged, though they can be greatly tempered on higher levels of function. Ambivalence is our lot.

Vastly greater is the cost to the one who utters death-dealing curses. It surely intensifies the depressive anxiety that invariably springs from one’s destructive phantasies and deeds. In his violent moments, Lear, with his powerfully narcissistic disposition and self-idealization, seems to have been well defended against experiencing that anxiety consciously; yet he cannot have avoided the consequent intensification of unconscious self-hatred and archaic guilt. A filicidal curse cannot go unpunished. Also, once there is movement toward the depressive position, the desperate curser will feel powerful reparative urges. Thus, as self-punishment, Lear offers up his life to Cordelia. Upon waking from a healing slumber that had been prescribed by Cordelia’s physician and, for the first time since he banished her, beholding Cordelia at his side, he says:

Lear: You do me wrong to take me out o’ th’ grave.
 Thou are a soul in bliss; but I am bound
 Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
 Do scald like molten lead.

(IV. vii. 45–9)

soon adding:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

(IV. vii. 72)

Unconsciously, we know Lear from the inside: his destructive narcissism and its consequences. And, in our unconscious ideals, we know Cordelia's unwavering goodness: in one respect, she stands for what we are in our self-inflating phantasies, not at all for what we are in the world. In another respect, she stands for what we aspire to: an unrealistically high goal we will have defined unconsciously as our Ego Ideal or Ideal Self (Schafer, 1967). This ideal sets a standard we cannot meet however hard we try. Cordelia's goodness speaks for the unconscious infantile standard by which we measure and often undervalue our better selves.

The Roman author, Terence, is quoted as having said: '... Nothing human is alien to me,' and, in our humanity, though in different ways, we are at one with every one of the major and contrasting aspects of experience and character that define Lear and Cordelia. In the end, as I mentioned, we are identified not only with Lear and Cordelia, but with the merged good-bad father-daughter as well. We are they, singly and in unity, for better and for worse. They/we include extremes that, on the one hand, we are eager to repress, as we do the abuse of Cordelia and our link to her abusive father, and that, on the other, we need help to acknowledge and to have acknowledged by the way others understand us.

In creating his plays, Shakespeare showed that understanding. For present purposes it is unnecessary to estimate how much he put into *King Lear* knowingly and how much he, like many creative figures, put into it the unacknowledged understanding implied in his unconscious perception and phantasies. It remains the case that we can find in his complex, balanced dramatizations insightful, supportive affirmation of who and what we are. We are helped to feel that we have been seen, heard, understood and accepted as never before, and we are prepared to say: 'I am not alone with my self, and my self is no longer such a stranger to me or so alien to this world.' The play shows a lot more than the sense of living in a world of unrelieved suffering and evil that can be stirred up by events acting on our unconscious guilt feelings and through our projections.

These positive responses do not guarantee lasting power to the feeling of having been transformed. The viewer's sense of having been ennobled is perishable. Only continuous, insightful, and hard work on our inner worlds can give us a chance to perpetuate the play's affirmative effect. The play shows the way; the rest is the work of the self.

Concluding remarks

I return to the clinical situation to reflect briefly on identification processes in clinical countertransferences. Of the seduction into repression, one might say it involves identification with the analysand's defenses. When we are strongly and unreflectively swayed by analysands' accounts of the deprivations and torments they tell us they have suffered at the hands of parents and others, we can be described as identifying with them not only in their distress but in their defensiveness as well. What is in question is defense against identification, for it is inevitable that the analysands will have identified with their significant figures of opposition. In identifying with these

negatively portrayed others, we do so out of our own sense of badness, the sense that fuels our own depressive anxiety. Our ever-present reparative wishes bolster defense against countertransference aggression.

Never to be forgotten are analysts' positive identifications with good but as yet denied or minimized aspects of these others – the goodness against which they have erected tough defenses (Schafer, 2002). Consequently, our trial identifications with our analysts, those identifications that facilitate our empathic listening, combine defense against internal and external aggression and positive identification with good but as yet denied or minimized aspects of these others.

In the same way that we know Lear and Cordelia from the inside, we know the primary characters in our analysts' unfolding dramas. We cannot be completely detached from them. Even if not all at once, we experience the goodness and badness they bring with them wherever they go. Both at the play and behind the couch, we are simultaneously immersed in our own internal worlds. And when this terribly tragic play ends, our feelings for Shakespeare are akin to those of the analyst as one's effective analysis draws to a close: deep gratification of the need to feel that one's many voices have been listened to, heard and understood without prejudice. For these affirmations, though not necessarily for these alone, we feel lasting reverence and gratitude toward the Shakespeare that he and we have jointly created.

Addendum

On Lear's narcissism and cruelty

As noted earlier, Hanly (1986) provides a perceptive analysis of Lear's narcissism and capacity for cruelty; his analysis of the play seems to be framed by his interest in defining a healthy father–daughter relationship. Simon (1988) also situates his similarly complex psychoanalytic discussion of the play within the frame of family dynamics, and he, too, highlights Lear's destructive narcissism. Schafer's (2005) essay remains sharply focused on the Lear–Cordelia confrontation in Act I, Scene 1. Numerous other authors refer to Lear's initial attack on Cordelia in milder terms: short-tempered, wrathful, childish and the like; they do not bring out in detail the terrible spectacle of a father's laying a murderous curse on his loving and allegedly favorite daughter. Numerous authors also rightly emphasize other contributing factors: Lear's vanity, his decline with age, his fear of death, and his disappointment in Cordelia after having anticipated a reversal of generations in which he would be mothered by his daughter, and his being already partly mad (see, for example, Adelman, Bloom, Bradley, Garber, Mack). But assessed from the present point of view, they fall short of giving full dramatic importance to the details of Lear's effectively murderous assault on Cordelia and its boomerang effect on his life. To a noteworthy extent, their essays are aimed at other essential elements of the play, for instance, on Gloucester and his sons, on Lear's madness, and on his final, partial accepting his lot as another merely mortal man.

On Cordelia's alleged muteness

This essay endorses Schafer's (2005) detailed critique of the many discussions of Cordelia that characterize her as essentially mute, struck dumb by her situation, or awkward of speech. These commentators include Bradley (see below), Fraser ("muteness" [1998, p. lxxii]), Kermode (who, although recognizing that Cordelia is not passively yielding and does speak up, still emphasizes how little she has to say [2000, p. 86]), Garber (Cordelia's "rhetoric of silence" [2004, p. 656]). It may be that these representative authors have been so taken by her opening response to Lear's demand for a loving speech by saying she has 'nothing' to say, by Lear's subsequent dwelling on the word nothing, and the symbolic, psychosexual possibilities offered by that word, that they seem to have paid scant attention to, or remained unimpressed by, all that she does go on to say on her behalf and his as well, and also on her sisters' hypocrisy. In this respect they may have also been influenced by Shakespeare's having 'silenced' Cordelia by having her off-stage for much of the play and so given comparatively few lines to speak (even her first moment of reunion with Lear is not enacted, only beautifully described by a witness). Nor do these commentators seem to have considered that her 'nothing' could be construed, in part, as the barbed response of a loving daughter who has been put in this inappropriate position by her father and resents it. Barbed, too, would be her seemingly prim account-keeping with regard to the portion of love left for Lear, for it was he, not she, who had repeatedly stressed division of his kingdom into thirds and sorted out the best third of all. Had the commentators been readier to attribute to her some wit and capacity for terse self-assertiveness, might they not have given her some credit for not taking Lear's abuse lying down? Her "no cause, no cause" later in the play is an instance of this terseness – in this scene a response entirely appropriate to Cordelia's dismay and concern upon finding him in so damaged and deteriorated a condition. True, Cordelia had earlier said that she was unable to heave her heart into her mouth (I. i. 93–4), but anyone not constrained to view her as mute could understand her to be referring to extravagant verbal declarations of love. In the same vein, when her sisters' speeches lead her to utter the preliminary aside: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I; i; 63–4), she could be heard as trying to review her options while gathering herself together for her 'nothing' *and* her subsequent speaking out. Her actions should speak louder than her words about remaining silent. In general, these commentators may be viewed as underestimating the strength that Shakespeare wrote into her role, a strength with an aura of royalty and identification with Lear's (now failing) majesty, a strength fit for the queen she is soon to be, and a strength that can only add to the play's tragic effect. A striking but, I think, ambivalent exception is Bradley's rich discussion (1904, pp. 291–6): although he says: "We all think of her as unable to speak for herself" (p. 291) and argues that she comes across as defenseless and unable to take care of herself, he also recognizes Cordelia's alive, verbal and protesting side; it as if he knows that she is not pathetic and realizes that a pathetic Cordelia would detract from the tragedy and yet, as though floundering, feels compelled to see her

otherwise. Too often, I believe, productions of the play detract from the force of the tragedy by presenting a subdued Cordelia, one who does not compete with the star, Lear, for audience response.

On the audience's collusion with the seduction to repress

Cavell's main thesis is the avoidance of love, the terrors that lie behind it, and its manifestations in selective, emotion-based blindness; consequently he lays great emphasis on the audience's "refusal to see" (2003, p. 89), that is, its collusion with the play's encouragement of forgetting – it "immobilizes" the audience (p. 99). Kermode points out that the succession of scenes, events and characters following Act I, Scene 1 makes the audience forgetful with regard to its brutal beginning (2000, pp. 195–200).

On Lear's witty encounter with blinded Gloucester

Critics bow before the greatness of this scene; however, they emphasize its heart-rending quality, and they do not, as I claim to do, discern both the cruel wit Lear displays in his exchanges with Gloucester and the implication that Lear is beginning to come out of his madness. One exception to this trend is Kermode who points out Lear's "'reason in madness' in this scene and his 'playing the fool's role'" (2000, p. 196). And although Cavell does point out the cruelty in Lear's remarks, which he regards as "cruelty inflicted for its own sake" (2003, p. 51), he does so in the context of Lear's having not yet fully recognized Gloucester.

On the play's final scenes

I agree with both Cavell and Kermode that Shakespeare's construction of the play's woeful conclusion was an act of cruelty directed at the play's audience. Many in the past have directly or indirectly rebuked Shakespeare for his cruelty in having Cordelia, and then Lear, die as the play ends. Indeed, 19th century productions of the play changed the ending to the happy one of Cordelia surviving, marrying Gloucester's good son, Edgar, and inheriting rule of Lear's kingdom. However, others – for example, Eagleton – have strongly supported Shakespeare for being consistent in his unrelieved focus on violence and suffering. The same audience-directed cruelty is evident in the on-stage portrayal of Gloucester's being blinded (Act III, Scene 7).

Translations of summary

Der Fluch und seine Folgen: King Lears destruktiver Narzissmus. Schock, Schmerz und Antipathie sind übliche Reaktionen des Publikums auf King Lears brutales Verhalten gegenüber Cordelia in der ersten Szene von *King Lear*. Jedoch geht das Stück so rasch zu anderen dramatischen Beziehungen und Ereignissen über, dass die Zuschauer diese Gefühle aus der Wahrnehmung tendenziell auszuschalten.

In dieser Abhandlung wird dieser Übergang hin zu anderen dramatischen Verwicklungen als Versuchung betrachtet, die Angst und Antipathie, die King Lear hervorruft, zu verdrängen. Dadurch eröffnet sich der Weg zu einer verständnisvollen Identifikation mit ihm, als er im Verlauf der weiteren Handlung Demütigung, Leiden und Wahnsinn erfährt. Diese gegensätzlichen Reaktionen helfen dabei, eine tragische Struktur zu konstruieren, in der ein vielschichtiger Lear das Opfer seiner Verfluchung von Cordelia wird. Der verführerische Aufbau ähnelt den Bemühungen von Analysanden, beim Analytiker eine den

Fortschritt der Analyse hemmende Vernachlässigung bedeutender Aspekte der Übertragung herbeizuführen, die der analytischen Aufmerksamkeit bedürften. Und die Konsequenzen, die King Lear aufgrund seines Fluches ertragen muss, werden mit bestimmten Gesichtspunkten der Dekompensation schwer narzisstisch gestörter Patienten verglichen. Hinzu kommt, dass in dem Maße, wie sich das Publikum wahrscheinlich unbewusst mit King Lear's Brutalität identifiziert und emotional an anderen schmerzvollen Szenen teilnimmt, es unbewusst ebenso mit Schuld und depressiver Angst reagiert. Diese Reaktionen verstärken die Bereitschaft, sich vom destruktiven Narzissmus und den Reaktionen darauf ablenken zu lassen.

La maldición y sus consecuencias. El narcisismo destructivo del rey Lear. Los violentos insultos del rey Lear a Cordelia en la primera escena de *El rey Lear* suelen causar en el público gran impacto, dolor y antipatía; sin embargo, el drama luego cambia tan rápidamente a otras relaciones y acontecimientos dramáticos, que tiende a hacernos poner de lado esos sentimientos. Este cambio es considerado aquí como una seducción a reprimir el temor y antipatía despertados por el rey Lear. Este efecto abre el camino a una identificación empática con él en su posterior humillación, sufrimiento y locura. Estas respuestas contrastantes ayudan a crear una estructura trágica en la cual un rey Lear más complejo deviene víctima de su maldición a Cordelia. Este intento seductor se parece a los esfuerzos de pacientes psicoanalíticos por inducir al analista a que descuide represivamente aspectos significativos de la transferencia que requieren atención analítica. Asimismo, se compara la manera como Lear soporta las consecuencias de su maldición con ciertos aspectos de la descompensación que sufren los pacientes severamente narcisistas. Además, en la medida en que el público se ha identificado inconscientemente con la violencia de Lear y ha participado emocionalmente en otras escenas dolorosas, como seguramente sucede, ha estado reaccionando inconscientemente también con culpa y angustia depresiva. Estas reacciones incrementan la disposición a ser distraído del narcisismo destructivo y de las respuestas a él.

La malédiction et ses effets: le narcissisme destructeur du roi Lear. La violence et la maltraitance du roi Lear à l'égard de Cordelia dans la scène 1 du *Roi Lear* suscitent le plus souvent chez le spectateur des réactions de stupeur, de souffrance et d'antipathie. Cependant, la pièce change ensuite et rapidement de direction et les relations et événements dramatiques qui viennent alors occuper le devant de la scène ont tendance à mettre de côté ces premiers sentiments. L'auteur de cet article interroge ce changement à la lumière d'une tentative de séduction visant à réprimer la crainte et l'antipathie éveillées par Lear et à créer chez le spectateur un mouvement d'identification et de sympathie envers l'humiliation, la souffrance et la folie qui se sont emparées de lui. Ces réactions contrastées favorisent la construction d'une structure tragique où le personnage de Lear gagne en complexité, jusqu'à se voir lui-même transformé en la victime de la malédiction proférée à l'encontre de Cordelia. Cette stratégie séductrice n'est pas sans rappeler les efforts des analysants qui visent à induire chez l'analyste une tendance à éluder en les refoulant certains aspects significatifs du transfert qui auraient dû attirer son attention. Les effets sur Lear du retournement sur sa personne propre de la malédiction s'apparentent à certaines caractéristiques des décompensations des patients narcissiques. Qui plus est, l'identification inconsciente du public à la violence de Lear et sa participation émotionnelle dans d'autres scènes douloureuses, ont également éveillé chez le spectateur une culpabilité et une angoisse dépressive inconscientes. Ces réactions accroissent sa propension à se laisser détourner du narcissisme destructeur et de ses effets.

Azioni violente e loro conseguenze: il narcisismo distruttivo di Re Lear. Shock, dolore e avversione sono le normali reazioni del pubblico di fronte al violento abuso di Re Lear nei confronti di Cordelia nella prima scena di *Re Lear*; tuttavia, il dramma si sposta poi così rapidamente su altri eventi e relazioni drammatiche da allontanare dalla mente tali emozioni. Questo spostamento viene qui considerato come un atto di seduzione per reprimere la paura e la repulsione suscitate da Lear. Questo effetto apre la strada a una solidale identificazione con il suo personaggio di fronte alla sua successiva umiliazione, sofferenza e follia. Queste reazioni contrastanti aiutano a costruire una struttura tragica nella quale un Lear più complesso diventa vittima della sua azione ignominiosa verso Cordelia. Il piano di seduzione assomiglia agli sforzi dei pazienti analitici per indurre l'analista a trascurare – reprimendoli – gli aspetti significativi del transfert che richiedono un'attenzione analitica. E la sopportazione di Lear delle conseguenze del suo atto malvagio è paragonata ad aspetti di scompenso di pazienti gravemente narcisisti. Inoltre, nella misura in cui il pubblico si è inconsciamente identificato nell'atti violento di Lear e ha partecipato emotivamente ad altre scene dolorose – come probabilmente è accaduto – esso ha anche inconsciamente reagito provando colpa e ansia depressiva. Queste reazioni accrescono la disponibilità a essere distolti dal narcisismo distruttivo e dai modi in cui rispondervi.

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