TRAGEDY AND THE WITNESS

Shakespeare and Beyond

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5. Giving Audience to Madness

> The mad are people who have never found, or never made, or never had, a sufficiently attentive audience. And this in itself might make us wonder what an audience is for. And remind us that the first audience is the family.[1]

This is an unpardonably long chapter, so it may be helpful to sketch the journey ahead. The chapter deals with how certain tragic dramas represent madness, states of mental disintegration or estrangement which are peculiarly challenging for those around them to relate to. The key issue is how the protagonist's inner life is felt to be supported or betrayed in the response of others. The phenomena of madness are understood as involved with an insufficiently supportive environment of onlooker and listener; to that environment they stand as both cause and consequence, as defence and also in some sense as riposte. My opening examples here are Beckett's *Not I* and Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. Developing these thoughts into *Othello* and *Hamlet* brings in a new element: the mother-child relation as something which figures or informs the support or betrayal of the protagonist by the world, as the protagonist perceives it. This idea becomes central to the readings of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* which follow.

A second line of thought accompanies the first from the start, gathering strength as the chapter goes on. This explores the relation between witness figures within the play and the kind of witness offered by the play itself: the kind of attending which the theatre implies or creates. When it comes to apprehending states of delusion otherwise than as mere delusion, the space of theatre offers special possibilities. I bring this thought forward when looking at Pirandello's *Henry IV* and Ibsen's *Master Builder*, before exploring how *Macbeth* and *King Lear* grant experiential reality to the inflamed subjectivities of their protagonists.

1 Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Penguin, 2013), p.174. From the appendix with Phillips' lecture, 'On Acting Madness'.

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All roads in this chapter lead finally to *King Lear*. There I come in the end to think about grieving, and what it means to think of grieving as a form of fully accomplished witness. Grieving in *King Lear* is both overwhelmingly required and overwhelmingly difficult, certainly for many of the characters in the play: perhaps also for the audience in the theatre. Nevertheless, theatre makes a difference, and I try to suggest how at the end of *King Lear* the dimension of theatre affects the manner of our witness and the manner of our grief.

'Witness me. See me.' Beckett's *Not I* and Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*

'Tell my story', the dying Hamlet implores Horatio. I have tried to bring out the potency of this idea, the need of the person who has suffered catastrophe to find that catastrophe held and reflected in the mind of another. But before Hamlet makes this plea, he attempts to tell some part of his story himself, through the apology he makes to Laertes before their fencing-match. This apology must cover his killing of Polonius and his behaviour at Ophelia's funeral, both actions easily describable as deranged, and madness is indeed the term that Hamlet reaches for. However, he does so in a way which suggests the difficulty of his truly telling his story for himself.

> What I have done
> That might your nature, honour, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet!
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged,
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (V.ii.230–39)[2]

2 Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), unless otherwise stated.

In this apology, which is really a confession that he is unable to apologise, Hamlet makes an awkwardly sharp distinction between mad and sane. By doing so, he cuts himself off from much of his behaviour in the play. He seems to have forgotten, or to be concealing, the fact that his 'antic disposition' was in some sense deliberately assumed. But in truth this was always a blurred area. In the original Hamlet story told by Saxo Grammaticus, there was some tactical purpose behind the revenger's pretending to be mad, but Shakespeare's Hamlet has no reason to do so: it brings suspicion upon him, rather than deflecting it. Playing mad is something that he wanted or needed to do; it seems to release some manic energy that both is and is not part of him, as well as shielding him from the imputations of an uncomprehending world. Was he straightforwardly 'not himself' when killing the figure behind the arras, or when outrageously disrupting Ophelia's funeral? If the account he gives Laertes seems discontinuous with his past behaviour, that itself underlines a different kind of truthfulness to the assertion of madness: not a temporary derangement of the now-restored true self, but a revelation of some more radical incoherence or self-division. 'What I have done' is replaced by an insistent hammering at the third person—'Never Hamlet!', 'Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it'—which conveys some radical slippage or fracture in the notion of Hamlet's identity. Telling my story includes, among its other strands of implication, the idea of telling the story that constitutes *me*, that gathers together the fragments which my self-experience presents, finding in them a continuous identity. For this, another person is needed, in whose view I become, or am found to be, a whole person with a coherent history. But Hamlet's attempt to stand as his own witness is hapless, splitting rather than unifying, still involved in the madness it repudiates.

Not I, declares Hamlet, as Mouth implicitly does in Beckett's play of that name. But whereas Hamlet claims to be standing on the further shore of madness, Mouth has no purchase on the raving she presents us with. She spews out fragments of memory and experience—jagged shards of what might be, but never become, her life-story—with a frenzied incoherence that has no first person to own it as her own, and vehemently denies that such a first person might come into being. 'Not

knowing what ... what she was—... what? .. who? .. no! .. she! .. SHE!'[3] And the lips clench and the teeth set, as if to ensure that no terrible word shall pass. Mouth is intermittently aware of 'something she had to tell ... could that be it? .. something that would tell ... how it was ... how she—... what? .. had been? .. yes ... something that would tell how it had been ... how she had lived', but before the end this something becomes 'nothing she could tell'.[4] Damage to identity is what Mouth unforgettably manifests but can never tell us about.

In the staging Beckett specifies all that is visible of Mouth is exactly that: illuminated lips, teeth, and tongue, like some strange life-form, with the rest of the face and body invisible in darkness, unknowable by us. The other figure in the play is described in Beckett's stage direction:

> AUDITOR, downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated.[5]

This movement is specified as a 'simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion. It lessens with each recurrence till scarcely perceptible at third.' It is prompted by the first four of the five 'Not I' moments that most strongly mark Mouth's dissociated state, when Mouth insists on the pronoun 'she' in her 'vehement refusal to relinquish third person' (Beckett's note).[6] Since there are four of these movements, lessening to the 'scarcely perceptible' by the third, it follows that the final gesture of compassion is something less than scarcely perceptible. The fifth 'Not I' moment elicits nothing at all.

With Beckett's Auditor, the act of witnessing has been reduced to the faintest possible trace. The fear and pity powerfully expressed by the chorus in Greek tragedy, the sympathetic anguish and prospect of loyal testimony from Horatio, have faded to almost nothing. We can

3 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p.382.
4 Ibid., pp.381, 382.
5 Ibid., p.376.
6 Ibid., p.375.

say that Mouth's tragedy is so incoherent, so damaged and fragmented in its expression, so trapped by its own need for denial, that no fuller response is possible than this 'falling back', this momentary gesture of a diminishing compassion that can effect nothing and lead nowhere. (Perhaps all compassion in tragedy is 'helpless', but the urgency with which it is solicited surely hopes for more.) But we might also speculate that Mouth's incoherence—her raving madness—and Auditor's inadequacy are mutually constitutive. Mouth's raving makes her almost impossible to understand, but also: Mouth presents as raving because she is not being, and has not been, properly heard, properly attended to, with the kind of attention that would gather her fragmentary experience into that of a whole person.

Beckett's play would then be showing us, in negative, something of the need for, the function of, a good auditor, a good witness. These issues are intensified by the sense that the Auditor, who stands downstage, is both a version of and a challenge to the actual audience. Anyone who has been present at a performance of *Not I*—especially and most wonderfully if not previously familiar with the text—can testify to the urgent need the play induces *to make sense of what is going on here*. This would involve finding a way of relating to Mouth as a dramatic character, a person, rather than as a strange and alienating phenomenon. The extreme difficulty of doing this threatens us with merely duplicating the response of the Auditor, and at some level we feel that insofar as we do so we are failing Mouth as others may have failed her. (The peculiar interest often taken in the stress placed on the actor who plays Mouth is perhaps an attempt to address this anxiety—as if our concern for Billie Whitelaw or Lisa Dwan might make up for our stumbling concern for Mouth.) The Auditor is a site of potential compassion but also, darkly robed and hooded, an obscurely sinister figure, in whose proximity to indifference there is a kind of terror. Hence the felicity of the textual pun on an auditor as someone who scrutinises the accuracy of the accounts submitted, and who may withhold validation.

Elsewhere in Beckett's drama we come across other auditors, none of them paragons of sympathetic understanding, but whose presence seems obscurely crucial to the protagonist: they figure the possibility though largely also the denial of such understanding. In *Endgame*, Hamm's expansive egotism, his self-relishing as a tragic figure, goes

hand in hand with the demand to have servant or parents available to listen to his self-dramatisations and his stories. In *Happy Days*, Winnie, buried in sand, draws some great comfort from the discovery that Willie is still in the vicinity and in earshot, however minimal his responses and support. These auditors enable a kind of coherent self-performance to continue; they preserve the main speaker from such solitude that even soliloquy would collapse in upon itself.

A particularly interesting variation is offered by *Krapp's Last Tape*. Each year, Krapp records his reflections on his life, preserving what he believes to be its fruits and significant moments for his own future listening. This might seem to provide guarantees against auditor-failure, for who could be a more sympathetic listener to one's story than oneself? But when Krapp now—elderly, something of an alcoholic, somewhat senile, perhaps somewhat deranged—listens to old recordings, we register the astringent discontinuity between what mattered to Krapp then and who he is now. Krapp is himself aware of this: 'Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that.'[7] The only evident continuity between them is an addiction to bananas. The boxes of tapes onstage represent the continuous story of a life's self-experience, but as Krapp flicks cursorily through them, impatiently fast-forwarding over passages that once meant a great deal to him, all we can witness is a story as fragmented and incoherent as that of Mouth in *Not I.*

Among these fragments, Krapp dwells only on one lyrical memory of sexual encounter, which he obsessively seeks out and replays. This is a moment when he and an unnamed woman were on the river together, on a punt on a sunny day.

> I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over to get them in the shadow and they opened. Let me in. We drifted in among the flags and stuck. […] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.[8]

7 Ibid., p.222.
8 Ibid., p.223.

The power and beauty of this memory lies not only in its sexual content, but in its image of suspension, the suspension of individual distinctness and ego, the self not as restless agent but as moved and held by a larger element. It is made possible when the woman looks at him: that is, when she responds to his request that she look at him, and her eyes truly open, and they 'let him in'. Beckett's syntax—'Let me in' as a free-standing sentence—aligns the sense of an imperative need with the granting of what is desired: 'please let me in'/'her eyes let me in'. The pleading is magically identical with the granting, in keeping with the specialness of the moment. It is the experience of feeling fully held and witnessed by another, of being properly *seen*. When Krapp listens to this on the tape, he is himself suspended, lost in reverie, and only in that lostness re-connected with his past.

After that moment of precious suspension, the play and the tape run forward once more, reinstalling that sense of discontinuity which time brings, as the recorded voice continues. The older Krapp has no way of relating to or 'letting in' what those younger voices represent, despite traces of a hankering to do so, just perceptible in his keeping of the tapes and the strenuous but fleeting and easily baffled attention that he gives them.

* * * * *

The ghostly presence of the Auditor in Beckett's *Not I* dramatises the distance between Mouth's anguish and the possibility of that anguish being shared or understood by another. The staging posits some crucial relation between the frantic subjectivity of the monologue—delivered at manic speed, with the urgency of a trapped animal racing around the walls of its enclosure—and the inability of the Auditor to reach out to or make connection with Mouth. Her madness and her isolation are aspects of each other, and this raises the stakes for us as her actual auditors in the theatre. Can we do better? Can we recognise in the bizarre phenomenon presented to us the pain of an actual person, with at least the minimum coherence of being which that implies, and with some discernible if fragmentary life-story or life-situation? Or put another way, can we recognise *Not I* as a play, a play that represents and allows us to engage with another's experience, despite its experimental form and its power to bewilder and disorientate?

Comparable questions are raised by Sarah Kane's final play, *4.48 Psychosis*, in which the relation of madness to a possible auditor or audience is still more pressingly explored. The play-text scarcely looks like a theatre piece. It does not allot speech to distinct speakers, does not specify how many actors are involved, and offers almost no directions for staging. It consists of different sections written in strongly contrasting modes or tones, with abrupt shifts of idiom and register, having no obvious narrative line despite a good deal of internal patterning and echo. These sections present as the voices of a fragmented personality, with the whole work struggling to establish itself as an internal monologue but painfully failing, both formally and psychologically, to hold it together.

However, two recurring strands can be made out which contest the impression of a mind enclosed within itself. One consists of passages of impassioned second-person address, with a marked affective quality that is very different from the bleached, depressive, mock-neutral tone that largely obtains in the more purely internal passages. The second consists of passages set out as dialogue, with dashes indicating change of speaker, most of which read as conversations between a patient and a psychiatrist.

Let me begin with these passages of apparent dialogue. The voice of the patient is generally mocking, self-aware, antagonistic; the voice of the doctor is generally well-meaning, patient, professionally reassuring, and intermittently inept. Some of the patient's ripostes have a bleakly comedic energy, suggesting unexpected resources of irony and self-possession. But at the heart of the exchanges is a genuine debate, which might be said to go to the heart of tragedy. Is the sufferer ill and delusional, in a deplorable deficit condition with regard to normal rational functioning, or are they in a condition which the category of illness fails to capture?

> —Do you despise all unhappy people or is it me specifically?
> —I don't despise you. It's not your fault. You're ill.
> —I don't think so.
> —No?
> —No. I'm depressed. Depression is anger. It's what you did, who was there and who you're blaming.
> —And who are you blaming?
> —Myself.[9]

9 Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p.212.

Similarly:

> —Why did you cut your arm?
> —Because it feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing.
> —Can I look?
> —You can look. But don't touch.
> —(*Looks*) And you don't think you're ill?
> —No.
> —I do. It's not your fault. But you have to take responsibility for your own actions. Please don't do it again.[10]

This debate is crystallised in the question of the meaning of 4.48. 4.48am is the time when the patient regularly wakes, when what we may call her depression is at its most acute, when she expects to commit suicide.

> At 4.48
> when desperation visits
> I shall hang myself to the sound of my lover's breathing
> I do not want to die
>
> I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit suicide
>
> I do not want to live[11]

This collapse of all desire, noted with alienated matter-of-factness, comes at the end of a sequence of self-denigrating statements, an accumulated conviction of utter worthlessness which cries out to be understood as dysfunctional, or at least as distorted by its overwhelming subjectivity. Yet in another passage set out as conversation with the doctor, the radical unhappiness of 4.48 is claimed as enlightenment, having a purchase on reality which is superior to that of normal daylight consciousness. It is now normal, well-adjusted consciousness which is seen as the delusional condition, one conferred by or conflated with the sorcery of medication.

> —At 4.48
> when sanity visits
> for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind.
> When it has passed I shall be gone again,

10 Ibid., pp.217–218.
11 Ibid., p.207.

a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool.
Now I am here I can see myself
but when I am charmed by vile delusions of happiness,
the foul magic of this engine of sorcery,
I cannot touch my essential self.

Why do you believe me then and not now?

Remember the light and believe the light.
Nothing matters more.
Stop judging by appearances and make a right judgment.

—It's all right. You will get better.

—Your disbelief cures nothing.

Look away from me.[12]

These exchanges express the opposition between the impulse to 'believe in' radical unhappiness, depression, and anger as the place of the 'essential self', and an external, clinical perspective that pathologises such life-threatening unhappiness as illness in need of cure.

The desperate absoluteness of that opposition is, however, repeatedly challenged. In the first place, it is complicated by the note of aggression with which it is sometimes expressed, an aggression which extends to the whole play's attitude to its hypothetical audience. 'Look away from me'—the essential motto of Coriolanus, and a repeated motif in Kane's play—addresses the audience even as it repudiates them; although overtly incompatible with the theatre as the place of seeing and witness, it maintains a residual theatricality, and is increasingly set against a contradictory demand: 'watch me', 'see me'. There are also other passages that envisage a relationship that could bridge the divide between inner world and other beings. We gather that one of the patient's doctors (presumably the one whose voice we hear) is perceived as unlike the others in having offered her a real connection, 'the only doctor who ever touched me voluntarily, who looked me in the eye'. 'I trusted you', 'I loved you', but in the end (or intermittently, for the sense of trajectory is problematic) this hope and trust are betrayed, in the patient's perception, by the doctor's refusal to relinquish a clinical stance. Like the others,

12 Ibid., pp.229–230.

the doctor still writes 'bare-faced fucking falsehoods that masquerade as medical notes',[13] and still maintains (though barely) the professional distinction between doctor and friend.

—You've seen the worst of me.

—Yes.

—I know nothing of you.

—No.

—But I like you.

—I like you.

(*Silence.*)

—You're my last hope.

(*A long silence.*)

—You don't need a friend you need a doctor.

(*A long silence.*)

—You are so wrong.[14]

This distinction has to be maintained, the doctor confesses, not only to enable clinical work to be done but for the doctor's own self-protection: 'I need my friends to be really together. (*Silence.*) I fucking hate this job and I need my friends to be sane.'[15] As throughout, the form of the piece leaves open whether the doctor is 'really' speaking, as a separate character on stage would speak, or whether these exchanges are as the sufferer recalls/intuits/fantasises them. In any production that respects the openness of Kane's script, we cannot tell whether the doctor's moments of crassness resolve out entirely into a critique of medical practice which pathologises distress, or are subjective projections of the sufferer's despair of being helped or properly heard, such that the doctor's voice is what the sufferer hears the doctor as meaning. Are we inside or outside the sufferer's mind? Reality as criterion is not reliably operative, and this kind of 'perspectival crisis' itself breaks down the

13 Ibid., pp.209–210.
14 Ibid., p.236.
15 Ibid., p.237.

boundary between internal experience and the external world. As one of Kane's best critics puts it, the audience are placed 'both within and outside of the spectacle, which itself both represents the experience of mental suffering and attempts to immerse the audience inside it.'[16]

In a different key from these sections of dialogue, but also contesting the absolute incommunicability of the self, are the passages that speak more directly and urgently of love. The love seems to be for a woman who is unresponsive or absent, perhaps dead, perhaps imagined. This love-object is sometimes spoken of in the third person, sometimes directly addressed, as if seeking to overcome—or simply to register—the acute isolation of the speaker.

> My love, my love, why have you forsaken me?
>
> She is the couching place where I never shall lie
> and there's no meaning to life in the light of my loss
>
> Built to be lonely
> to love the absent
>
> Find me
> Free me
> from this
>
> corrosive doubt
> futile despair[17]

As with the moments that envisage a good relationship with the doctor, the impulse to connection imagines a healing or at least overcoming of the rending division between the speaker's inner life and her condition as regarded by others. This is enacted also in the form of the piece, where what threatens to be an entirely internal monologue, sealed within the mind, strives to achieve dramatic form, a form in which different voices encounter or engage with one another, and which is necessarily written with an audience in mind. Kane described the play as being about 'what happens in a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear

16 Leah Sidi, *Sarah Kane's Theatre of Psychic Life: Theatre, Thought and Mental Suffering* (London: Methuen, 2023), pp.135, 137–138.

17 Kane, *Complete Plays*, p.219.

[…] you no longer know where you stop and the world starts'.[18] This description of the experiential reality of psychosis also speaks easily to the potentialities of theatre, its suspension of disbelief; the resonance between theatrical experience and psychotic experience makes space for a mode of understanding that is not objectifying or diagnostic.

As the work moves towards its deeply ambiguous close ('please open the curtains'), the tension between the need for connection and the failure of connection is expressed with great clarity. At 4.48, 'the happy hour', something becomes clear:

this vital need for which I would die

to be loved

I'm dying for one who doesn't care
I'm dying for one who doesn't know

you're breaking me

Speak
Speak
Speak

ten yard ring of failure
look away from me

My final stand

No one speaks

Validate me
Witness me
See me
Love me

my final submission
my final defeat[19]

The antiphonal form of this passage (which will not quite survive until the end) is in itself a gesture beyond the isolation of the self towards the

18 Quoted in Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.112.

19 Kane, *Complete Plays*, p.242–243.

condition of drama, and although the passage moves towards death, it matters that this is now understood as a death 'for' something, for the sake of something rather than because of something, namely for the lack of an imaginable witnessing, an imaginable love. Allusions to the Passion ('why have you forsaken me?', 'It is done', 'look after your mum now')[20] also bring into play the bare possibility, at least, that this 'final defeat' may be not without meaning. The immediate anguish acquires a wider resonance. And if the final line—'please open the curtains', which is yet another imperative seeking a response—suggests an action in a hospital ward or at a deathbed, it also expresses a desire to let in the light, to make visible. Light breaking in, as into a dark or sealed chamber, has been an intensely ambivalent motif in the play: the epiphanic moment of 4.48, the light that must be 'remembered' and 'believed in', also appears at four separate moments as 'Hatch opens. / Stark light'[21]—an intrusion from outside that reveals matter for terror and despair. 'Please open the curtains' re-imagines this bleak event both as an exchange between persons and as the object of desire. Significantly, it grounds this desire in the situation of the theatre, as if only now discovering itself as theatre. At the end of a conventional play in the modern theatre, the curtains close between actors and audience, re-installing the boundary between illusion and reality, on one side of which the spectators safely find themselves. At the end of this unconventional play, the desire is for the opposite; the curtains of separation are to be opened, the subject wishes to see and be seen. Even supposing we could set aside the play's proximity to its author's death, *4.48 Psychosis* is an extraordinarily difficult work to engage with, but it *offers us* that difficulty as its core subject-matter, challenging us to receive it as—to collaborate in making it into—however barely and hazardously, theatre. 'Witness me. / See me.'

Othello, *Hamlet*, and maternal support

The distinguished psychologist Peter Fonagy has argued that 'the experience of having our subjectivity understood' is essential to the formation of what he calls 'epistemic trust'. From the experience of another person reliably mirroring my feelings back to me ('Look at me. This is

20 Ibid., pp.219, 242, 243.
21 Ibid., pp.225, 230, 239, 240.

what you are feeling'), there grows my larger 'willingness to consider new knowledge from another person as trustworthy, generalizable, and relevant to the self'. Without such experience, I am left in 'a state of interminable searching for validation of experience, coupled with the chronic lack of trust that we describe here as epistemic hypervigilance.'[22]

Trust and the lack of trust are at the centre of *Othello*, and Fonagy's account speaks acutely to Othello's jealousy: a term that implies a generalised anxious suspiciousness, beyond the specifically sexual. *Othello* in turn offers an opening into thinking about madness in other Shakespeare tragedies and its relation to being securely witnessed. Othello is generally described as jealous rather than mad, but madness is hardly too strong a term for the condition he falls into. When Iago sets him up to spy on his meeting with Cassio, he assures us that 'as he [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad' (IV.i.100). Othello's behaviour before the Venetian envoy strikes Lodovico as deranged: 'Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?' (IV.i.269). His conviction that Desdemona is unfaithful is based on almost no external evidence but is driven by insecurities and pressures from within. We watch him come apart before our eyes—'I think my wife be honest, and think she is not' (III.iii.384)—disintegrating at his lowest point into unbearable fragmentation.

> Lie with her! 'Zounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief —confessions —handkerchief! To confess, and be hang'd for his labour—first, to be hang'd, and then to confess. I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil! (IV.1.36–43)

This is not wholly unlike the stream of semi-connected language that pours from Mouth in Beckett's *Not I*.

Like Mouth, Othello speaks these words in the presence of an unsupportive auditor, but Othello's auditor is the yet more disturbing figure of Iago, who has replaced Desdemona as Othello's confidant, his listener. I make the point in that way in order to emphasise—as Shakespeare does—that Desdemona's love is above all a matter of

22 See Peter Fonagy and Elizabeth Allison, 'The Role of Mentalizing and Epistemic Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship', *Psychotherapy*, 51 (2014), 372–380.

good listening, at least as Othello experiences it and reports it. In my second chapter, I spoke of how her response makes her a kind of ideal witness or audience for the tragic protagonist. Let me return here to that originating moment of Othello's great love and dwell more fully on what happened there for him.

Othello's life has been one of strange adventures, lived in the world of the battlefield without a break until the brief time he has spent in Venice. Desdemona's father invites him to the house, curious to hear his stories, and this interest taken in him is something which Othello already understands as love. 'Her father lov'd me; oft invited me; / Still question'd me the story of my life' (I.iii.128–29). But the daughter proves a still better audience:

> These things to hear
> Would Desdemona seriously incline;
> But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
> Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
> She'ld come again, and with a greedy ear
> Devour up my discourse. Which I observing,
> Took once a pliant hour, and found good means
> To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
> That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
> Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
> But not intentively. I did consent,
> And often did beguile her of her tears,
> When I did speak of some distressful stroke
> That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,
> She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;
> She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
> 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
> She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
> That heaven had made her such a man. She thank'd me,
> And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story.
> And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
> She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
> And I lov'd her that she did pity them.
> This only is the witchcraft I have used.
> Here comes the lady; let her witness it. (I.iii.145–70)

Othello's tale of wonders offers as its climax, its greatest wonder, how Desdemona listened to him. It is as if his experience has never really been present to him, never been charged with affective life, until this moment; as if her tears were what enabled him, in the line that follows, to feel for the first time his youth as 'distressful'. Othello's life has no story until he can tell it, and he can tell it properly only to a special kind of listener—one who is 'intentive':

> Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
> But not intentively.

Desdemona has already been devouring Othello's discourse with a greedy ear. 'Intentively' implies something more; it suggests that Desdemona is actively contributing something. She will no longer hear Othello's life 'by parcels', as a series of disconnected parts, but in a way that gathers it into a whole as the story of a person, a person that can be loved. It becomes, now, a 'pilgrimage', a meaningful journey with a sacred destination. If parts of his story sound rather like a fantastical traveller's tale, this is appropriate because what Desdemona is making real through her attention is an inner life where fact and fantasy are not distinct: that is, Othello's sufferings and adventures as they are present within his mind. The incantatory music of his language speaks of the potency of that inner life; it tells us that the mental realm he moves in has the exalted quality of romance. This makes it potentially vulnerable to the jagged edges of the world and to inimical ways of seeing the world—were it not supported by another. Desdemona gave Othello for his pains 'a world of sighs', and that phrase suggests not only a great many, but also that her reciprocating listening gave Othello a *world* in which his pains could find footing, could become real to him because they were recognised by her. Othello's dawning revelation that he and Desdemona *understand one another* is there in how they each pick up hints from the other's speech, as each draws the other out: he 'found good means / To draw from her' a request for his whole life-story, and she finds good means to draw from him a declaration of love. She has listened to him so well, so 'intentively', that intimate reciprocation and communication are wonderfully easy. Thus Othello *knows* with absolute confidence that Desdemona will, once again, support the story of himself that he tells, perfect witness that she is. 'Here comes the lady; let her witness it.'

As the action of the play will show, by committing himself to this love, Othello is greatly risking himself. Desdemona has drawn his inner life out into the world, an inner life of exalted feeling conveyed through his extraordinary lyricism of language, with the promise that in the world it can be supported, that her nature and her being will be its support. This, for him, is what it means to enter into marriage. His passion dares to exist, in that it has an object that reflects and reciprocates his feelings; the world, in Desdemona's person, can be trusted with his inner life. And this is so—but not quite so. When Desdemona comes before the senators, she indeed affirms, passionately, that her love is freely given. But she does not speak with Othello's voice; his note of lyrical exaltation is replaced by a tone not exactly worldly, but one which situates love's power within the given social world. When she says to her father, 'I do perceive here a divided duty' (I.iii.181), her perception of division recognises that there are, so to speak, two worlds, that the romance of their union must find its way within an unromantic world. Later in the scene she asserts to the Duke, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I.iii.252). This is to give the world of Othello's mind priority: she sees him in generous part through the lens of his own subjectivity, his inner life. But she does so while remaining steadily conscious of the degree of choice, or transformation, that that involves. The blackness of his skin is the play's insistent reminder that he and she are, for all their love, irreducibly separate beings, and in thus knowing herself to have set that difference aside she also acknowledges its reality. All of which is simply to say that the play allows Desdemona her separate existence, so that alongside her immense commitment to her love she may also sustain a warm friendship with Cassio, banter at the edge of bawdy with Iago, inhabit a different kind of intimacy with Emilia, and notice appreciatively that Ludovico is 'a proper man' (IV.iii.35). Her love, being freely given—not compelled, as by witchcraft—may conceivably be withdrawn. This is the risk that Othello runs (and of course that she also runs, though differently). But if love as Othello experiences it excludes the idea of separateness, then its betrayal is not so much a risk as a certainty.

Alongside his total assurance that all is well, Othello has moments when he glimpses how great the stakes are here.

> But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
> I would not my unhoused free condition
> Put into circumscription and confine
> For the sea's worth. (I.iii.25–28)

And again, in the last words of serenity that he utters, as Desdemona departs from him in Act 3:

> Perdition catch my soul
> But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
> Chaos is come again. (III.iii.90–92)

Othello was made able to love, we recall, because he felt that Desdemona loved and pitied him: because his inner life was known and made real by her. To feel that assurance is simultaneously to become aware of the potentiality for chaos from which it provides rescue. When the assurance is withdrawn, the collapse that follows is total and extreme:

> But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,
> Where either I must live or bear no life;
> The fountain from the which my current runs
> Or else dries up: to be discarded thence! (IV.ii.57–60)

There could be no stronger expression of the self's dependence on another for its very existence as a coherent entity.

'The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up: to be discarded thence!' Othello's dependency on Desdemona is as total as an infant's at the breast, and he imagines being discarded as an intolerable weaning. Which is also to imagine weaning—the necessary discovery of the separateness of others—as an intolerable discarding or betrayal. Nine months have passed since Othello came to Venice, a period of time suggesting the gestation of a new life about to come out into the world, along with a context of maternal nurture. The magical protection afforded by such nurture, and the catastrophe represented by its loss or drying up, appears again with Othello's handkerchief and the infinite calamity which he tells Desdemona attends her losing it—'such perdition / As nothing else could match' (III.iv.67–68). The handkerchief was given to him by his mother and has an intensely female ancestry. It was woven by an ancient sibyl out of the stuff of maidens' hearts, and

given to Othello's mother by an Egyptian enchantress who was another specially talented witness, for she 'could almost read / The thoughts of people' (III.iv.57–58). While kept safely by Othello's mother, the handkerchief had the power to

> subdue my father
> Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
> Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
> Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt
> After new fancies. (III.iv.59–63)

Othello carries within him the belief there is something inherited from his mother which, while possessed, makes intimate relationships with others blissfully secure (although there is now incipient revolt in that word 'subdued', and in the return to the idea of love as magical enchantment that was so impressively rebutted in the senate scene). But the loss of that object turns intimacy into hatred and opens the gates to destabilising imaginations—'new fancies' meaning both other love-objects and ungrounded fantasies. In this scenario, the woman's actual behaviour is, remarkably, irrelevant; everything about the man's feelings towards her depends on the possession or the loss of the magical maternal inheritance.

What emerges here is a further model of good witnessing: the mother's relation to the child. Othello's rapturous speech of how he and Desdemona came to love is focused on how perfectly she attended and responded to him; there is no sense of his reciprocating curiosity about her own separate life. As the basis for a relationship between adults, this doesn't bode well; but it resonates with a child's properly and healthily narcissistic experience of maternal love.

The importance of the relation between the young child and the mother has been the particular concern of that strain in psychoanalytic thinking known as 'object relations theory'; among that group of thinkers, I want particularly to draw on the work of Donald Winnicott, and on Winnicott's emphasis on the mother's ability to 'hold' the child's feelings in the first months and years of life.[23] By 'holding', he means

23 I follow Winnicott in speaking of the primary carer as the mother, who most typically—though not always—has that role.

an exceptionally responsive attunement to the child's inner life: the mother is able to recognise and participate in the child's feelings, and to reflect those feelings back to the child in a confirming way. Through this, the child begins to sense that such feelings can indeed be 'held' in the mind, rather than being the tumultuous, unshaping engulfment which infantile passion otherwise is.

Most mothers are 'good enough' at providing this support, Winnicott believes, and his thinking is in some ways more sanguine than that of Freud, whose tendency to see inescapable conflict in the child's relation to their parents and the desiring individual's relation to the reality-principle has made him a more obvious support in discussions of tragedy. But Winnicott's emphasis on the value of being 'held' in the mind of another goes hand in hand with the understanding of how terrible is the alternative. Passion which is not 'held' in this way is unbearable in its intensity. Winnicott speaks at one point of its being like finding oneself within a den of wild beasts. The child is engulfed by conflicting feelings of love and hate, fear and rage, exposed to the terror of utter annihilation. There is an 'unthinkable or archaic anxiety'[24] generated by the child's intuition of their utter vulnerability; they have no way of managing the fact that their very existence is dependent upon the attention of external and therefore unreliable others, in an environment which (whatever its actual nature) their rage and fear makes appallingly hostile. Moreover, the child's experience begins as sporadic and disconnected, 'in bits'; the child depends upon the mother to gather his bits together, to make possible a self-experience as a whole being.[25] But until and unless this happens, there is a radical incoherence of being which, being unsupported in its encounter with the world, is intolerable. Madness, in certain forms, manifests this incoherence; or, delusion can be a way of denying such incoherence by creating a world in which the emotions of the psyche seem to find an anchor. (Thus a monstrously unfaithful Desdemona gives Othello some object for his feelings—although disbelieving in her goodness is nearly as hard for

24 D. W. Winnicott, 'Ego Integration in Child Development', in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*: *Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Karnac, 1990), p.61.

25 D. W. Winnicott, 'Primitive Emotional Development', in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958), pp.145–156.

him as believing in her infidelity is compelling: a further turn of the screw to his disintegration.)

In describing this condition of anxiety and disintegration, Winnicott is sometimes referring to the minority of situations where the 'holding' support in the early years was not good enough, situations more likely to lead to the psychiatrist's consulting room. But in other passages, he writes as if the radical vulnerability and danger negotiated in childhood were something that never leaves any of us, or that it can be triggered or duplicated by traumatic experience in later life which—in one way or another—cuts us off from the sense of being known or knowable by others. By this way of thinking, even the healthiest person has the potential to fall into that unthinkable archaic anxiety which, at some level, we all know about, or deny at our peril.

> No doubt the vast majority of people take feeling real for granted, but at what cost? To what extent are they denying a fact, namely, that there could be a danger for them of feeling unreal, of feeling possessed, of feeling that they are not themselves, of falling for ever, of having no orientation, of being detached from their bodies, of being annihilated, of being nothing, nowhere?[26]

One of the simplest and commonest things said about tragedy is that it involves a fall out of security. Thinking about the value of being heard and 'held' provides a gloss on what that security consists in, and how it may be forfeited. In his Auschwitz memoir *If This is a Man*, Primo Levi wrote of a recurring dream or nightmare, in which he was able to tell of his camp experience after the fact, in a safe and friendly setting.

> It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.
>
> A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. It is pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain

26 D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst*, ed. by Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (London: Penguin, 1990), p.35.

> like that which makes children cry. [Levi discovers that this dream is shared by many of the inmates of the camp.] Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?[27]

This electrifying passage speaks of the fear that although Levi's words may be heard, they will communicate nothing, that his listeners will fail to participate in his experience as he needs them to. The experience of living in the camp is so extreme, so strange and appalling, that it may be incommunicable or intolerable to those who hear of it. And their refusal or inability to enter into his experience affects Levi as threatening his very existence as a person ('as if I was not there'), generating a sense of falling terribly out of human communion. The nightmare is that there can be no bridge between the horror of Auschwitz and the world of ordinary social relations, no way of locating one in relation to the other. And remarkably, Levi associates the desolating grief 'born' in him with 'certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy [...] a pain like that which makes children cry'. It is as if his situation had re-awakened those early feelings of pain in his mind. They are described as 'pain in its pure state', an internal condition which lacks any stabilising sense of external reality or intelligible cause.

How much am I claiming, if I claim that these considerations are relevant to tragedy and to Shakespearean tragedy in particular? I want to propose the mother-child relation as analogy for or perhaps as exemplary case of the need for witness, rather than as explanation. The need to be heard and understood remains recognisable and urgent throughout life, even if it is most influentially negotiated in early childhood. So I am not claiming that the intensities of tragedy must be related to childhood experience, only that the dramatist's conception requires that the protagonist enter into a naked intensity of feeling akin to that which the analyst posits in the young child. Nor am I claiming that the witness is always at some level a figure of the mother, nor that a tragic protagonist has a personal history behind what appears in the play which we can infer. Nothing here amounts to a method of interpretation, a key which

27 Primo Levi, *If This is a Man / The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987), p.66.

unlocks matters otherwise hidden or mysterious, or discovers feelings in Hamlet or in Lear other than those which immediately appear.[28]

Where psychoanalytic insight seems helpful, however, is in understanding the intensity of the emotions generated in tragic drama when the support of witness collapses or goes missing—and why we do not find the extremity of the reaction simply eccentric or bizarre. That Othello should care *so* much that Desdemona could conceivably betray him—so much, that the foundations of his being crumble and give way; so much, that he destroys what he most loves—might seem, coolly regarded, the mark of a peculiarly dysfunctional personality. But it does not, in the dramatic moment, strike us as entirely strange. If we are appalled, we are also gripped: something *comes home to us* at these moments, in subliminal recognition of our own needs and vulnerabilities.[29] The power of tragedy reminds us that these are never definitively managed or entirely in the past. Even if we have been well listened to and 'held', and have built a self that engages successfully with the world, the potential for that primitive terror and rage and grief remains.

A passage comes to mind from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, whose opening line proclaims that work's general relevance to these questions. 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me from among the orders of the angels?' If

28 Interpretation is not the aim. Against the Freudian model, Winnicott came to believe that the task of the therapist was *not* one of interpretation, but rather the provision of an environment which tolerated confusion and uncertainty and the limit to what is communicable. In this wisdom there is something for the literary critic to share.

29 I do not mean to minimise the part played by Othello's racial difference. In *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), Ato Quayson traces how Iago, as master-manipulator of representations, draws on the contradictions of cosmopolitanism to induce in Othello an agony of incoherence that extends from his cultural environment to penetrate his self-experience. 'No one is immune from the inter-subjective inscriptions that the social world places upon the self, for the self is first and foremost the product of social relations' (p.81). This is part of Quayson's powerful larger argument about how the unsupported position of the colonial or postcolonial subject—between (at least) two worlds and belonging securely to neither—brings a 'loss of hermeneutical coherence' (p.10) that makes them peculiarly vulnerable to tragedy. To give a narrative account of the self requires 'facing outward to an external point which elicits the self-accounting' (p.32); Quayson's attention to how self-experience is entangled in the modelling offered by the immediate environment, compromised or contaminated by historical contingencies as this may be, is the line along which his account broadly dovetails with my interest in the ruptured relation between self and witness, or child and mother.

one of the great motifs of the *Elegies* is 'the absence of an echo [...] the despair at not being able to be heard',[30] that despair is, in the third elegy, set explicitly against the mother's presence to her child. There, the poet addresses the mother and speaks of her power to protect her child from what are, in the first place, night-terrors.

> over his new eyes you arched
> the friendly world and warded off the world that was alien.
> Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by placing
> your slender form between him and the surging abyss?
> How much you hid from him then. The room that filled with suspicion
> at night: you made it harmless; and out of the refuge of your heart
> you mixed a more human space in with his night-space.
> And you set down the lamp, not in that darkness, but in
> your own nearer presence, and it glowed at him like a friend.
> There wasn't a creak that your smile could not explain,
> as though you had long known just when the floor would do that ...
> And he listened and was soothed. So powerful was your presence
> as you tenderly stood by the bed; his fate,
> tall and cloaked, retreated behind the wardrobe, and his restless
> future, delayed for a while, adapted to the folds of the curtain.
>
> And he himself, as he lay there, relieved, with the sweetness
> of the gentle world you had made for him dissolving beneath
> his drowsy eyelids, into the foretaste of sleep—
> he *seemed* protected ... But inside: who could ward off,
> who could divert, the floods of origin inside him?[31]

In representing the world to the child as friendly rather than alien, indeed making the world such, the mother is also protecting the child from impulses within, or more precisely from that surge from the abyss which would flood the external world with 'more ancient terrors', overwhelming its separateness. The mother can protect the child from that, can make the external world safe, for as long as she stands tenderly by the bed and smiles. But she cannot permanently abolish what is within, 'the floods of origin', the sleeper's dream-world, his 'interior

30 Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern, 'Rilke's *Duino Elegies*', in Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. by Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.1.

31 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (London: Picador, 1987), pp.163–165.

wilderness, / that primal forest', place of 'more ancient blood', which the following lines establish as the site of fascination and even desire, as well as terror.

> Loving,
> he waded down into more ancient blood, to ravines
> where Horror lay, still glutted with his fathers. And every
> Terror knew him, winked at him like an accomplice.
> Yes, Atrocity smiled ... Seldom
> had you smiled so tenderly, mother. How could he help
> loving what smiled at him.[32]

Rilke's celebration of the mother's power to nurture and protect goes hand in hand with acknowledgement of the reality of that which the child is protected from. The mother's smile competes with the smile of Atrocity, which likewise says to the child: we have an understanding (*war wie verständigt*), I know you, your feelings are known and shared by someone who stands (albeit equivocally) outside yourself. The fascination of atrocity, which is such a large element in tragedy, is identified in these lines as the dark double of the mother's nurturing presence, involved with it from the very start.

None of this is to insist that the protagonist's tragedy is rooted in their childhood or in their relations with the mother. Still, where a mothering figure coincides with the appealed-to listener, there may be a special charge of emotion. (It is interesting to discover that the source for Beckett's Auditor was a mother waiting for her child.)[33] When Hamlet harangues Gertrude in the closet scene for the vileness of her relationship with Claudius, the intensity of his reproaches has been understood as arising from his obsession with the sexual, and/or his competitive (Oedipal) rivalry with her partner, and/or a deep sense of contamination by the maternal body.[34] But we can add to this a simpler observation: he

32 Ibid., p.165.

33 In Morocco in 1972, Beckett observed 'a solitary figure, completely covered in a djellaba, leaning against a wall. It seemed to him that the figure was in a position of intense listening'. This was, he then discovered, 'an Arab woman waiting there for her child who attended a nearby school.' Enoch Brater, quoted in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.589.

34 Janet Adelman's brilliant study, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Routledge, 1992), tracks Shakespeare's recurrent imaging of the maternal body as stifling or contaminating. She persuasively argues that this male revulsion at one's inescapably female origin—epitomised in the

needs his pain to be properly heard. Gertrude's liaison with Claudius has been the manifest sign of her failure to enter into Hamlet's grief. From the beginning of the play, she has treated his distress as something less than infinite. She cannot or will not show that she feels what he feels. For her, life goes on, and what she probably regards as an accidental death has luckily favoured an adulterous preference. What is traumatic for her son is for her no such thing. And this disjunction between how the child feels and how the mother feels is unbearable for Hamlet.[35] Palpably, what we see in this scene is that Hamlet hates Gertrude as well as loves her, has no way of reconciling these emotions, but obscurely feels that if he could get her to acknowledge his anguish in the right kind of way, there might be some prospect of moving forward. This implies, among other things, her registering but also surviving his hatred; 'I will speak daggers to her, but use none'[36] (III.ii.396). He may represent this as an attempt at her moral reform, but the urgency behind his assault on her speaks of a more primitive demand. Primo Levi's recurring nightmare was of 'the unlistened-to story'; he described his need to make those who were not there participate in his experience as a 'violent impulse', something as fundamental as the impulse to self-preservation. When Hamlet violently assaults Gertrude with his words, he is screaming at her *to hear what he*

Hamlet-Gertrude scene—is one of the great drivers of Shakespearean tragedy. The emphasis on the mother as oppressive that Adelman locates can be understood as rage at the failure of maternal 'holding', and in that respect speaks to my own approach; I am indebted to her study, even if I am more inclined to see the destructive mother as simply the dark side of the positive function I associate with witnessing. On the question of Shakespeare's 'complicity' in the feelings he dramatises she is particularly interesting, and I return to this later in relation to Cordelia.

35 Winnicott describes the effect on the child of an insufficiently responsive mother, who requires the child to adapt to *her* needs, in a way that is strikingly applicable to Hamlet. 'The feeling of real is absent and if there is not too much chaos the ultimate feeling is of futility. The inherent difficulties of life cannot be reached, let alone the satisfactions. If there is not chaos there appears a false self that hides the true self, that complies with demands, that reacts to stimuli, that rids itself of instinctual experiences by having them, but that is only playing for time.' D. W. Winnicott, 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation', in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Karnac, 1992), pp.304–305.

36 This may seem like a weakened (or more civilised) revision of Orestes's killing of his mother, the substitution of metaphorical or verbal violence for the real thing. But survivability is an important principle in Winnicott's thinking. There is immense reassurance for the infant in the mother's ability to survive, undamaged, the rage and hate that the infant feels for her from time to time. I discuss this further in relation to Cordelia.

is telling, and so to enter into what he is feeling, despite his despair that she seems unable to do so. Or we might even say that he is seeking to communicate his trauma by traumatising her, if that is what it takes.

Madness is very much in play in this scene. Externally regarded, Hamlet's behaviour must appear as deranged: in a state of high excitement, he madly kills Polonius, hallucinates his dead father, and pours his disgust and horror over Gertrude with little cognisance of the separate person that she is. But Shakespeare also makes us intimate with Hamlet's mind. The Ghost may reflect Hamlet's subjectivity, his 'prophetic soul' (I.v.40), but it is also a theatrical reality, and the information it brings becomes established as a reality of the plot. For all that Hamlet behaves in a deranged way, we do not readily think of him as mad because, at one level, he knows the truth, and that knowledge is what is driving him here. Claudius and Shakespeare have between them supplied him with an actual crime which supports his prophetic soul, his inner world of hate and horror. Nevertheless, there remains a gap between the intensity of his emotions and what his listener is able to enter into. Gertrude finds it hard to understand what disturbs him so terribly; and many spectators and readers have felt that Claudius and Gertrude are not shown by Shakespeare to be as vile as Hamlet needs them to be. Hence the question of madness remains, if madness involves the insistent imposition upon others of an inner world which they cannot recognise. When Hamlet harangues Gertrude, not only projecting his feelings onto her but also demanding a response, he is seeking to find some purchase in the external world for what he feels. Specifically, he is seeking to find that his feelings can be 'held' in his mother's mind. Does he succeed? There is latitude for the director here. When Gertrude is brought to acknowledge the black spots in her own soul, this is a kind of corroboration of what Hamlet has in his mind, and brings him a degree of relief. The rage and horror abate, and the scene can be played in such a way that they achieve a tenuous understanding. Hamlet can now imagine, as a future possibility, some blessed reciprocation between them, when a good relation between child and parent will be restored:

> Once more good night,
> And when you are desirous to be blest,
> I'll blessing beg of you. (III.iv.170–72)

There is a huge ache of desire around those lines. But the scene can also be played to suggest that Hamlet has drawn Gertrude into his inner world—has to some degree drawn her into his estrangement. The good witness, like the good-enough mother, is someone who can *make connection* between the child's raging feelings and the external world—who enters into those feelings, yes, yet holds them as a separate being, without being overwhelmed by them. It is a function of that necessary separateness that the witness can show back to the sufferer what they feel, can find words to tell their story. But it is precisely the condition imposed by Hamlet that Gertrude should *not* tell his story, that she should not reveal to others that he is 'not in madness / But mad in craft' (III.iv.187–88). She duly reports to Claudius that Hamlet is 'mad as the sea and wind' (IV.i.7). But whether she intends this as a calculated deception, or whether this stands well enough for her as a summary of his behaviour in that scene; whether she speaks as an ally of his conscious intent, or as herself succumbing to the greater reality of his madness, is—like so much in *Hamlet*—hard to tell.

Playing and playing mad: Pirandello's *Henry IV*

In Hamlet's lines to Gertrude, he distinguishes between being 'in madness' and being 'mad in craft'. What is it to be 'mad in craft'? Hamlet would seem to say that he is only pretending to be mad or only playing mad, but playing mad when you have no reason to do so (which is Hamlet's case) doesn't seem entirely sane. In the play as a whole, it is clear enough that the 'antic disposition' which Hamlet puts on is no mere disguise but releases real energies from within him. Feelings of emptiness and cynicism, of misogyny and of disgust with both himself and the world, are projected outward with an equivocal degree of commitment, a relishing of their hyperbolic performance that allows Hamlet to mean them and not quite to mean them, leaving space for their possible eventual disavowal. His character is something that, for much of the play, Hamlet performs or plays, holding open the notion of a coherent identity that sits somewhere between the character(s) that he plays (manic, melancholic, philosophical, satirical …) and the source of that playing. Only as the end approaches and the time for performing closes down does Hamlet seek to leave behind his madness, and the

performing of identity gives way to the need for a narrative identity, a story which someone else could tell. In the meantime, being 'mad in craft' occupies a middle space between madness and sanity, suggesting some crafty negotiation of intentionality, some sense that madness is where Hamlet wants to be, at least for a time. This chimes with the fascination that madness often has in tragic drama, the pull that it exerts on its audience as a space to which we likewise are drawn. The madness of Lear or of Ophelia or of Agave in Euripides' *Bacchae*—all figures who are deeply 'in madness', without any shadow of pretending—does not strike us only as the terrible affliction which it would do in life, but also, though obscurely, as transmitting an energy-source, presenting as a release from or protest against constraint, perhaps even as an enhanced mode of being or perception. Insofar as tragic theatre challenges the sovereignty of rationality, the mad figure may strike us not as eccentric but as close to the heart of things.

To think about this, let me return to the model offered by the object relations school of psychoanalysis, and to the thought of Winnicott in particular. Whereas some strains of Freudian thought have a strongly developmental cast, figuring dysfunction as stuckness or regression and maximal adjustment to the environment as the optimal goal, object relations theory is more reluctant to suppose that we can leave infant emotional conditions behind, but thinks rather 'in terms of states of mind and not of stages of development'.[37] The child's fears, fantasies, and needs persist through life, and the inner or imaginative life in which they persist has a claim on reality as strong as that of the external world.[38] Yes, they can be managed, first by the presence and then by the internalisation of a nurturing figure, and they can be brought into self-awareness and co-existence with more truly other-oriented relationships, but they cannot be outgrown. Instead, they persist in the adult psyche as needing to find expression and acknowledgement, to be heard and 'held', with slippage into alienation or crisis as the permanently threatening alternative.

37 Margot Waddell, *Inside Lives: Psychoanalysis and the Growth of the Personality* (London: Karnac, 2002), p.196.

38 Winnicott: 'It is important for us that we find clinically *no sharp line* between health and the schizoid state or even between health and full-blown schizophrenia.' *Playing and Reality* (London: Penguin, 1974), p.77.

> It is sometimes assumed that in health the individual is always integrated, as well as living in his own body, and able to feel that the world is real. There is, however, much sanity that has a symptomatic quality, being charged with fear or denial of madness, fear or denial of the innate capacity of every human being to become unintegrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal.[39]

To this, Winnicott added a striking footnote:

> Through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings arise and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane.[40]

Tragic drama is an obvious candidate for such a form of artistic expression. To be affected as tragic drama affects us is not to be 'only sane': in the case of Shakespearean tragedy, we enter into modes of experience which manifest to observers as 'madness', but which we are made to know too intimately to categorise in that distancing way.

In the account of the psyche that Winnicott gives, the developmental goal is not simply to yield as much of our inner (child's) life to the external (adult) world as we can bear to. More unequivocally than Freud, Winnicott finds danger in what he calls 'compliance'; the inner world is no less real than the external and should not be sacrificed to it. Instead, ways must be found for the two to dance together. The good-enough mother is found both to belong to the child's inner world and to be a separate, external being, allowing mediation between the worlds. Such mediating power is then extended to other sites, in particular Winnicott's 'transitional object'—the comfort blanket or beloved toy that is the magical carrier of the child's passionate life while still being sufficiently part of an external world to bring the sense of being supported from outside. Later, this flowers into other forms of playing, which come to include those forms of art which acknowledge a dual obligation to the nature of the world and the life of the mind. To grasp the whole of Winnicott's thought, it is important to see how this capacity for play or transitional space is thought of *both* as a means to an end (adaptation to the world, acknowledgement of others as others, responsibility, political

39 Winnicott, 'Primitive Emotional Development', in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958), p.150.

40 Ibid., p.150.

life) *and* as an end in itself, the site of properly creative living, the place of 'feeling real'. Space for creativity is key to this. From the baby's illusion that he creates the presence that answers his need, flowers the 'hope that there is a live relationship between inner reality and external reality, between innate primary creativity and the world at large which is shared by all'.[41] That live relationship is, according to the argument of this book, what the good witness might provide—including that witness offered by tragic drama. But in the absence of such witness or such a play-space, the insistence that the world be as the mind creates it readily presents itself as madness.

One begins to see how playing mad, or being 'mad in craft', might preserve a crucially valuable space for Hamlet which strict sanity would deprive him of. And as an extension of that, how a theatre which to some degree plays along with such an impulse might open such a space for the audience.

To put some more flesh on these thoughts, I would like to turn to Pirandello's *Henry IV*, first performed in 1922, which offers a particularly clear example of a tragic protagonist who plays mad. The play is set in the world of contemporary Italy, but the curtain rises on what is apparently the throne-room of the medieval German Emperor Henry IV. This historical world corresponds, we gradually discover, to the inner life of the protagonist (whom we must call Henry since Pirandello gives him no name of his own, leaving us with only that of the role he plays). We thus have two time-worlds superimposed on one another, and the drama turns on the relationship between these two worlds, and the possibility of establishing a connection between them.

The back-story, gradually revealed to us, is that twenty years previously the protagonist was taking part in an historical pageant or masquerade, in which he had chosen the role of Henry IV. Thrown from his horse, he suffered a blow to the head, after which he believed that he was in truth the medieval ruler. His nephew then created for him a setting in which to accommodate that delusion, complete with people employed to pose as his servants and associates in this historical costume-drama. However, as the play progresses, Henry claims that some eight years ago his delusion cleared, and he became aware of his

41 D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.90.

situation. Nevertheless, he chose to continue living and acting as the Emperor within this artificial setting, rather than return to life in the twentieth century. Recovering his sanity (or something like sanity), his response was to play mad, living in a manner that might be regarded as equally if differently deranged.

The immediate occasion of the drama is the arrival of figures from Henry's circle, accompanied by a psychiatrist. They have heard rumours that Henry has moments of near-lucidity and have decided to intervene. Their plan is to shock him into recovery by engineering a confrontation between the past or fantasy world and the present. The most important of these figures is the Marchesa Matilda, to whom Henry was intensely attracted at the time of his accident, and who seems to have partially reciprocated that attraction; however, she settled in the end for laughing at him for his intensity, though not without conflicting feelings. This is how she recounts the situation to the doctor:

> One of the many misfortunes that happen to us ladies, my dear Doctor, is to find ourselves now and again before two eyes that look at us with a contained and intense promise of everlasting devotion! (*sentimento duraturo*) [*She breaks out in high-pitched laughter*.] There is nothing more ridiculous. If men could only see themselves with that everlasting devoted look of theirs. I have always laughed about it —then more than ever! But I must confess: I can do so now after twenty and more years. When I laughed at him this way, it was also out of fear, because one, perhaps, could have believed in a promise like that from those eyes. But it would have been very dangerous.[42]

The pressure-point here is the word 'everlasting': something that could keep its identity through the fluctuations of time. Such devotion (intensely subjective, dependent on the lover not seeing himself from outside) seemed to the Marchesa incompatible with the ways of the modern world and thus 'ridiculous'. (Iago mocked at the notion of love as high romance.) But she now acknowledges that with her mockery went a fear that a connection might after all be possible—a connection

42 Luigi Pirandello, *Henry IV*, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*, trans. by Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1995), pp.86–87.

between them as lovers which would also be a connection between two different worlds, and therefore (as tragedy often shows such connections to be) 'very dangerous'.

For her role in the masquerade, the Marchesa chose her historical namesake the Marchesa Matilda of Tuscany, and it was this that triggered the protagonist's choice of 'the great and tragic Emperor' who was Matilda's medieval contemporary. In various ways, the historical figure of Henry IV is shown to be a fitting carrier of the protagonist's inner life and the contradictions of that life. Most obviously, he is a figure of great power—serving the fantasy of omnipotence. It is merely another manifestation of that imperial power when, in his recovered condition, Henry relishes his domination of those required to collude in his fantasy. But Henry IV is also a deeply insecure figure, mistrustful and suspicious, prone to fits of rage and anxiety. This is linked to the loss of connection with his mother; he tells how at the age of six the bishops 'tore me away from my mother, and against her they used me', and we hear also of the 'obscene rumour' spread by his enemies about his mother's sexual behaviour.[43] Since the loss of his mother, his life has been full of enemies plotting against him, and although this is true enough of the power-politics of the eleventh century, it also perfectly expresses the mindscape of paranoia. Henry's great historical adversary was Pope Gregory VII, and we hear in the play of his great terror of the Pope's supernatural, magical powers, such as his ability to call up the dead. ('A persecution complex!', the psychiatrist patly exclaims.)[44] At the height of their conflict, the Pope excommunicated Henry, undermining his power-base, and in what became a famous act Henry travelled to Italy to seek Gregory's absolution, and is said to have waited outside the castle of Canossa for three days as a penitent—barefoot in the snow—until granted an audience with the Pope. In the play Henry wears this penitential sackcloth over his regal robes, and declares that 'my life is all made of humiliations', although Pirandello's exacting stage direction requires—'in contrast to' such humble repentance—'a fixed look of suffering which is frightening to behold'.[45] His chosen historical role thus gives external form to the conflicted fantasy-life of the psyche:

43 Ibid., p.97.
44 Ibid., p.92.
45 Ibid., pp.96–97.

powerful yet insecure, enraged yet fearful, humbled by constraint yet resentful of humiliation.

The castle of Canossa belonged to Matilda of Tuscany, powerful supporter of the Pope and therefore, in history, Henry's frequent and vigorous enemy. However, the story goes that at Canossa she pleaded for Henry to the Pope, and that she was instrumental in their all three taking communion together. When the contemporary Marchesa chose the role of Matilda for the masquerade, she recalls that the protagonist chose the character of Henry so that 'from then on he would be at my feet like Henry IV at Canossa'.[46] So for Henry, Matilda is both the enemy who seeks to resist and destroy him, and the conceivably sympathetic figure whose support might enable him to enter into communion once more, releasing him from his alienated and wretched condition. Here too the historical story gives form to powerfully conflicting feelings, and in some degree holds them together.

All this indicates why it might suit the protagonist first to choose the role of Henry IV, and then to become Henry IV as a fantastical way of projecting a painfully conflicted inner life. But something else needs to be added. We never feel that the figure we see is purely delusional; the discovery that he has recovered from his injury merely confirms our sense that he is *playing* Henry IV, acutely aware of the theatricality of his performance and so simultaneously detached from it. He swings between magniloquent over-emphasis and a cursory running through of his part that verges on dropping out of role altogether. He verges too on glancing at his own memories and situation and at the situation of those who have come to visit him, behind their historical costume. For example, he points out to the Marchesa the over-obvious hair dye which signals that he is playing a Henry much younger than he is, while noting her own use of cosmetics as exactly similar:

> God forbid that I should show disgust or surprise! Foolish aspiration! Nobody wants to recognize that certain dark and fatal power that assigns limits to the will.[47]

46 Ibid., p.86.
47 Ibid., p.98.

That dark and fatal power is the course of time which turns hair grey, or more generally stands for the pressure of external reality. Fantasy offers to create a space in which that power is suspended, a space which stretches across the spectrum between delusional and playful. Henry seeks to override the dark power in the playing out of his fantasy life, but he knows here that he is (merely) playing at youth.

This consciousness of role-playing seems to be his defining characteristic, stemming from before his freakish accident. Here is Belcredi, the Marchesa's admirer/lover, struggling to explain to the psychiatrist the way in which he was always eccentric, and the peculiar way in which he projected his eccentricity:

> I don't mean to say that he was faking his eccentricity; quite the contrary, he was often genuinely eccentric. But, Doctor, I could swear that he was acutely aware of himself in acting out his eccentricity. And I think this must have been the case even in his most spontaneous actions. Furthermore, I am certain he must have suffered because of it. Sometimes he would go into the funniest kinds of angry fits with himself! [...] And why? As far as I could tell, because that instant lucidity that comes from acting a part suddenly excluded him from any kind of intimacy with his own feelings, which seemed to him to be not exactly false—because they were sincere—but rather like something he had immediately to give the value of—what can I say?—of an act of intelligence, to make up for the lack of that sincere and cordial warmth that he felt was missing. And so he would improvise, exaggerate, let himself go—that's it—in order to forget his troubles and to see himself no longer.[48]

This sounds very much like one reading of Hamlet's 'antic disposition'. It also expresses a point of view that is central to the play. From this point of view, personal identity or 'character'—as we normally lay claim to it for ourselves and encounter it in others—is masquerade; it pretends to a definiteness and fixity (*sentimento duraturo*) that the passage of time is continually undoing. For people to behave as if their selves possess such solid reality makes them ridiculous, reveals them as 'clowns'—the

48 Ibid., p.88.

derisive term Henry uses for those around him. To occupy this point of view is to take an ironic attitude, to see life as theatre, characters (including one's own) as *dramatis personae*, the masks used in the play.

Within the theatre, this attitude almost inevitably sounds like insight. But it is also, as the Marchesa perceives, a position of suffering which leaves Henry permanently alienated, excluded from intimacy with himself or with others. Here is Henry to the psychiatrist, who is wearing the costume-disguise of a medieval monk:

> None of us lie or pretend! There's little doubt about it: in good faith we have fixed ourselves, all of us, in a fine concept of our own selves. Nevertheless, Monsignor, while you hold tight, clinging with both hands to your holy cassock, there slips away, down your sleeves, like a snake shedding its skin, something you are not aware of: life, Monsignor! And it's a surprise when you see it materialize there all of a sudden in front of you, escaping from you. Spite and anger against yourself, or remorse, also remorse.[49]

And here is Henry later, now revealing his true state of consciousness to his alarmed mock-attendants, on why crazy people—those who make manifest the incoherence and vulnerability of the self—are frightening to others:

> You feel that it can also turn into terror, this fear of yours—something that makes you feel the ground beneath your feet disappear and takes away the air you breathe. It must be that way, gentlemen. Do you know what it means to find yourself standing in front of a crazy person? To find yourself face to face with a person who shakes the foundations of everything you have built up in and around you, the logic of all your constructions! [...] Mutable! Changing! You say, 'This cannot be!' and for them everything can be. [...] Because how terrible it is, terrible if you do not hold on very tight to what seems true to you today and to what will seem true to you tomorrow, even if it is the opposite of what seemed true to you yesterday! How awful it is to have to flounder, the way I have, in the thought of this terrible thing

49 Ibid., p.99.

> which drives one truly mad: that if you are next to someone and looking into his eyes—the way I looked one day into a certain person's eyes—then you can imagine what it is like to be a beggar in front of a door through which you shall never be able to enter. The one who does enter will never be you with your own interior world and the way you see it and touch it, but rather someone unknown to you, like that other one who in his own impenetrable world sees you and touches you …[50]

Although we cling to fixities, and most especially the fiction of our solid identity or self, life is on the move, changeable and changing—*volubile!*—and to know this is to feel the self as a masquerade, a theatrical role. Mental illness, being 'crazy', is both a terrifying demonstration of this vulnerability and, perhaps, a creative response to it: living as Henry does, with that conscious projection of self as a role, allows him to continue as someone in spite of the slippages and discontinuities of time, and to hold his incoherence in the act of performance. But this is also a position of suffering. Henry's speech finishes with a powerful image of privation, that of the beggar in front of a door that is closed to him. To go through that door would be to become someone else, someone unknown and unrecognisable, so that the beggar's pleading could never be granted. It is impossible to imagine, at this moment, how the needs of the inner life could be met by conditions outside the self, so radical is the divide between them. That look from Henry's eyes, which speaks of a '*sentimento duraturo*', becomes laughable—does it? must it?—in a world of slippage and change, in which trauma and disaster rupture continuity, in which Henry's loving sister dies, and in which youth becomes old. Why did Henry not return to the world when his delusion cleared? Because, he says, 'I understood that not only my hair but all the rest of me as well must have turned grey, and everything collapsed, everything was over, and I realized that I had arrived hungry as a bear to a banquet that was already over.'[51] The landslip in time created by trauma opens up, again, an image of radical privation, of need that cannot be met. Henry understands this with great clarity, but his understanding only heightens his suffering and his rage.

50 Ibid., p.122, translation slightly altered.
51 Ibid., p.132.

The look into the eyes is what passes between Henry and the Marchesa, and it is from her, if from anywhere, that relief might come, and a passage between his inner life and the external world might be opened. For in his mind she belongs to both worlds. As Matilda of Tuscany, she is Henry's great enemy who may nevertheless support him at his moment of crisis; as herself, she is the woman whom he loved with that dangerous look, who mockingly rebuffed him, but who was, at the moment of the masquerade, minded 'to show him that my heart was no longer as hostile towards him as he might have imagined'.[52] At the end of Act One, she presents herself to him not as Matilda of Tuscany but in a maternal role, in the guise of Henry IV's mother-in-law, whose daughter accompanied him on his journey to the Pope. Henry addresses her along with the doctor, who is also in medieval dress, but the essence of his plea is to her. He points fearfully to the modern portrait of himself in the masquerade costume of Henry IV as a work of magic in which his enemy the magician-Pope has imprisoned him; this, he says, is his 'true condemnation'. Could she effect his release from confinement within this fixed and loveless role?

> Now I am a penitent and I shall remain so; I swear to you that I shall remain so until he [the Pope] receives me. But then the both of you, once the excommunication has been revoked, must beg the Pope on my behalf to do this which he has power to do: to release me from that, there [*points again to the portrait*], and allow me to live wholly this poor life of mine from which I am excluded. One cannot be twenty-six years of age for ever, Lady! And this I ask you also for your daughter's sake: that I may be able to love her as she deserves to be loved, so well disposed as I am now, full of tenderness as I am now, made so by her pity. There you have it. This. I am in your hands.[53]

This is a mad speech which pleads to be rightly understood, rightly heard. Henry cannot, by himself, re-enter life. But at this moment he can imagine, through the figure of the historical fiction, how Matilda's supportive understanding might enable him to do so. It matters that

52 Ibid., p.113.
53 Ibid., p.102.

she is such a richly composite figure for him at this moment. As Henry IV's mother-in-law, she is a maternal figure, restoring the mother from whom he was torn away by his enemies when young. As Matilda of Tuscany, she is the enemy who became his friend at his moment of greatest need. She is also herself—it's clear from the preceding dialogue that Henry has recognised her—the woman whose acceptance of his love might have given (might still give) his inner life a foothold in the world. And she is also the daughter of whom he speaks. Historically, this refers to Henry's wife, who pleaded with him in the snow at Canossa for admission to the Pope; and in the play, Matilda's actual daughter looks uncannily identical to the portrait of her younger mother. The daughter's pity of which Henry speaks confuses, and thereby holds together, then and now: the historical support he was given at Canossa, the reciprocation of his love which Matilda may have shown him twenty years ago, the compassionate understanding of his pain which she may show him at this moment. The function of this pity is that it will enable him to emerge from his 'excommunicated' state and, specifically, once more to love. (We might think here again of Othello's love, brought into being by Desdemona's pity, itself brought into being by how she listened to his story.)

All this depends, however, on the speech being rightly heard, its complicated sub-text understood. Pirandello's theatre audience are placed in roughly the position of the Marchesa: can we understand the implications of Henry's speech, can we recognise the human reality beneath the play's dazzlingly clever conceit, thereby releasing him from his fixed role? In the study this may be clear, but in the theatre, and especially at a first encounter, it is asking a lot of the audience, and the real possibility that we may fail—and thereby fail Henry, fail to take him back into human communion—is part of the drama.

As for the Marchesa, she has listened well, and is profoundly affected. The first act ends with the stage direction: 'The Marchesa is so deeply moved, she drops suddenly into a chair, almost fainting'.[54] In the second act she is contemplating, not entirely consciously or voluntarily, 'a certain intention stronger than herself'[55] (stage direction), and she insists, against the others, that Henry recognised her.

54 Ibid., p.102.
55 Ibid., p.103.

Matilda: And then his words seemed to me to be full, so full of regret for my youth and for his own—and for the horrible thing that happened to him, and has held him there, in that masquerade from which he is unable to release himself and from which he wants so much to free himself.

Belcredi: Of course! So that he can start his love affair with your daughter. Or with you, as you believe, now that he has been made tender by your pity.

Matilda: Of which there is much, I beg you to believe!

Belcredi: Clearly so, Marchesa! So much so that even a miracle-worker would most probably attribute it to a miracle.[56]

When, as Henry IV's mother-in-law, she comes to take her leave of the king, he takes her to one side and asks her, with charged insistence, whether she wishes him to love her daughter.

Henry IV: Well, then, is it your wish?

Matilda: What?

Henry IV: That I return to loving your daughter. [*He looks at her and quickly adds in a mysterious tone of warning mixed with alarm:*] Do not be a friend, do not be a friend of the Marchesa of Tuscany!

Matilda: And yet, I tell you again, that she has not begged, she has not implored any less than we have to obtain your pardon.

Henry IV: [*quickly, softly, trembling*] Don't tell me that! Don't tell me about it! For God's sake, my Lady, do you not see the effect it has on me?

Matilda: [*looks at him, then very softly, as if in confidence*] Do you still love her?

Henry IV: [*bewildered*] Still? How can you say still? You know then, perhaps? No one knows! And no one must know!

Matilda: But perhaps she, yes, she knows, if she has begged so on your behalf.[57]

56 Ibid., pp.106–107.
57 Ibid., p.116.

As if this comes closer than he can bear, at this point Henry switches into animosity that cuts off any further rapport.

But the rapport is clearly there. Establishing it depends on the inbetween, indeterminate status of the dialogue, which flickers between referring to Henry's historical fantasy-world and to his actual feelings for the Marchesa. When he endeavours to explain himself at the end, the Marchesa is noted to be 'enchanted' by all that he says, 'fascinated by this "conscious" insanity'.[58] Conscious insanity: that is to say, we do not feel that Henry is simply faking his madness, detached from his performance, in control of the double meanings. He may know that he is not living in the eleventh century, and that his visitors are in costume or disguise, but this does not mean that the eleventh century is not real to him. The doctor likens this capacity of mind to that of a child, in a way that anticipates Winnicott: Henry can 'recognise disguise as such [...] and at the same time believe in it, the way children do, for whom it amounts to a mixture of play and reality'—although such play-capacity is rendered 'extremely complicated' in his case, the doctor adds, by his entanglement with a fixed image.[59] The possibility of his re-entering the world does not imply his leaving his inner fantasy-life behind, but of finding some way of connecting or accommodating both together.

This bears on why the plan for his cure ends in disaster: it supposes a simple binary opposition between delusion and actuality, such that Henry could be carried across from one state to the other. The portraits of Matilda of Tuscany and Henry IV are replaced by living people identically posed and costumed, who are to step out of their frames and 'come to life': the shock of witnessing this will release Henry likewise to step out into real life—that is the doctor's plan. But Henry first collapses in terror, and then is enraged by his visitors' presumption: for the masquerade permeates real life no less than it characterises the throne-room, and his performance as Henry IV, even if undeluded, was still not the game or joke which they take it to be. 'You are not crazy', Belcredi insists, and Henry responds by seizing a weapon and running him through. 'Am I not crazy? Here, take that!'[60] After this there can be no way back: the protagonist will be, in the final words of the play,

58 Ibid., p.134.
59 Ibid., p.104.
60 Ibid., p.135.

locked into his condition 'for ever'. And the most piercing of the cries that goes up at the end, Pirandello specifies, is that of the Marchesa.[61]

The general thought I want to introduce here has to do with the contrast between the outcome within the play and our experience of the play. The doctor forces a confrontation between Henry's inner life and the reality of the external world; he acts in this respect as an agent of that 'dark and fatal power that assigns limits to the will', enforcing a sharp dichotomy between sanity and madness, to catastrophic effect. The play, however, significantly supports or colludes with Henry's fantasy life, creating an in-between space, as we have seen—felt particularly in those charged dialogues with the Marchesa and in the affinity between 'conscious insanity' and conscious theatricality. The play might be said to mimic the action of Henry's nephew in supplying a play-world which answers to his inner life. Without supposing ourselves for long to be in the eleventh century, we are reminded of how easily theatre accommodates such supposing, and certainly the figures from real-world contemporary Italy seem less real, less interesting, than the consciousness of Henry as he lives at the border between the two worlds. Henry plays mad, but the play plays along with him, up to a point, and this theatrical hospitality to his madness is crucial to the tragic effect.

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61 I find it impossible not to reflect on the biographical context. Pirandello had recently committed his wife Antonietta to an asylum, after many years of managing or trying to manage her terrorising, delusional, and sometimes violent behaviour, which at one point had driven their daughter to attempt suicide. (In all such cases one must wonder about the husband's contribution to the wife's madness, but Antonietta seems to have had a disturbing upbringing with a tyrannically jealous father; her mother is said to have died in childbirth because the father refused to allow a doctor to be present.) *Henry IV* is a play that urgently tries to bring us into affinity with what it also recognises as a bizarrely disturbed condition of mind—to find a way of honouring that condition without glamourising it. Asked by a journalist whether his wife's illness had allowed him 'to study the world of the mad, their psychology and their logic', Pirandello replied: 'Whoever suffers and lives the torment of a person he loves is unable to study it because that would mean assuming the indifference of a spectator. But to see life being transposed in the mind of my poor companion enabled me later to convey the psychology of the alienated in my creative writing. Not the logic. The lunatic constructs without logic. Logic is form and form is in contrast with life. Life is formless and illogical. So I think the mad are closer to life. There is nothing fixed and determined in us. We have within ourselves every possibility, and suddenly, unexpectedly, the thief or the lunatic can jump out of any one of us.' Gaspare Giudice, *Pirandello: A Biography*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.119. For Pirandello's relationship with Antonietta and for her illness, see pp.57–66, 82–87, 98–101.

The general principle appears in a helpfully clear, almost schematic form in Ibsen's *Master Builder*, a play already discussed in an earlier chapter. Solness, the master builder, believes that his mere wishes have the power to produce real effects—believes it enough, at least, to be terrified, obsessed, and fascinated by the idea. Surely the man is on the verge of psychosis, of madness? So his wife fears, and a doctor stands ready to make that diagnosis. Yet when (as he recounts it) Solness imagined his wife's house burning down, it burnt down in fact; when he imagines youth knocking at the door, the youthful Hilde knocks at the door. She enters the play for all the world as if she were the incarnation of his unconscious fantasies, come to free him of his fear and his guilt by showing him that those fantasies can, after all, discover an object that exists in the world. Which is to say that the drama itself, to some large degree, colludes with or supports the 'madness' of Solness. Its naturalism barely contains passages written in a more expressionist mode. When Hilde and Solness frame their exchanges in increasingly symbolic terms, speaking of the trolls that may attend on them, or of the castles in the air that they will build, these words strike us neither as deranged nor as merely figurative, but as having power and meaning. We are more inclined to see Hilde as an uncanny figure than a neurotic stalker seeking to impose her fantasies on the world (although both perspectives remain available). Uncanniness, as Freud understood it, is generated when the world appears to validate an illusory mode of perception or projection that properly belongs only to a young child, whose deference to the reality-principle is still weak. This fits well enough with Solness's sense of 'the omnipotence of thoughts' (Freud),[62] and with our sense of Hilde as the paradoxically real creation of his mind. Theatre has a comparable power to create a real object for feelings that previously had none, and Ibsen draws on this power. Solness's inner world is, to some large extent, made real upon the stage; if this is madness, it is a madness with which the play sympathises and which it supports.

And yet: this is true *only* to some large extent. To call Hilde uncanny is to register what the feeling of uncanniness always tells us: that *something is wrong here.* We never enter so entirely into the expressionist mode of

62 Sigmund Freud, 'On the Introduction of Narcissism', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), p.360.

the play as to lose our hold on mundane reality. If Hilde encourages Solness's fantasy life, this is not without a certain mockery. Her feyness co-exists oddly with a kind of hearty downrightness. And her infatuation with Solness, or with her heroic idea of him, is complicated by her real concern for his suffering wife. The wife has made herself into a martyr to duty, and is easy to dislike or dismiss, but Ibsen shows us what lies behind her rigidity: an inconsolable maternal grief for her dead children, infected, as she supposes, by the fever in her mother's milk that was contracted as a result of the fire. Somewhere deep beneath the action lies this immense maternal grief, grief at the failure of maternal support, grief at the horribly broken relation between mother and child. 'Those two little boys—are not so easy to forget.'[63] It is an unvoiced lament, expressed neither by the grimly stoical wife nor with any fulness by the play itself, but whose weight nevertheless pulls down hard against the febrile restlessness of Solness's mind. When at the end Solness suspends his vertigo for long enough to climb to the top of the tower, 'doing the impossible', our sense of symbolic triumph is poised against our perception of an act of folly, as his heavy body then falls to the ground. This is a balancing act which Solness himself cannot sustain.

Macbeth

Imperfect speaking and the inner world

'Nothing is / But what is not.' The uncanny quality that I have been discussing in *Henry IV* and *The Master Builder* could well be glossed by Macbeth's response to meeting the witches (I.iii.141–42). It is a state of mind that arises at the juncture between madness and sanity, in the mixture of excitement and disturbance that comes when the buried life of the mind appears to generate or be reflected by phenomena that are out in the world. For these phenomena bring dangerous witness to what would otherwise remain unrealised.

At the start of *Macbeth*, we are given a contrast between two different kinds of witnessing. In the second scene, Macbeth is introduced to us

63 Henrik Ibsen, *The Master Builder*, in *Plays: One. Ghosts, The Wild Duck, The Master Builder*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p.285.

through two strong acts of reporting, as first the bloody sergeant and then Ross bear witness to his extraordinary prowess in the battle. He is acclaimed as 'noble Macbeth', 'Bellona's bridegroom' (I.ii.67, 54), an irresistible force guaranteeing victory, a man who 'well [...] deserves' the heroic 'name' given to him by others (I.ii.16). This great prowess entails great violence, yes, and we may feel some tension when the warrior who 'unseam'd' the rebel leader 'from the nave to th'chops' is saluted as a 'worthy gentleman' (I.ii.22–24)—a phrase which stretches hard to accommodate such elemental violence within the cause and form of civilisation. That all this blood should be cleansing, like Christ's at Golgotha, is a strenuous idea:

> Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
> Or memorize another Golgotha,
> I cannot tell—(I.ii.39–41)

The troubling physicality of that image of bathing in reeking wounds—in blood that cleanses, a conceivable image of the function of tragedy itself—carries some strain, and for a moment the story breaks down; the wounded soldier can speak no more. But the narrative is immediately taken up again and made good, as Ross enters to 'speak things strange' and bring the story to a triumphant conclusion. Macbeth's near-magical victory over all opposition is grounded by the certainty and sufficiency with which his prowess is recognised by the community. The story is complete, entire, admitting no question. We are given the good witnesses who securely establish the hero. Hamlet, at the end of his play, implored Horatio to heal his 'wounded name', to establish his commendable identity through the story he tells. What Hamlet asked for at the end, Macbeth begins with.

But in the next scene, Macbeth encounters reporters of a very different kind. The witches too give him his titles, present and future, telling his story forwards; but they are equivocal beings in every sense, and they tell that story in a fragmented, incomplete, enigmatic way. They are what Macbeth calls them, 'imperfect speakers' (I.ii.70). Their speaking exists at the uncertain border between what is really out there and speakable of, and a fantasy world which it would be madness to confuse with reality.

> Were such things here as we do speak about?
> Or have we eaten on the insane root
> That takes the reason prisoner? (I.iii.83–85)

When he then hears this fragmentary story of himself partly confirmed, as the king's emissaries bring him the title of Cawdor, there arises in Macbeth an extraordinary state of mind. The encounter with the witches, so swiftly reinforced by the news about Cawdor, suggests to him that there might be some footing in the external world, some speakable form, for half-thoughts and half-desires that in themselves are 'but fantastical'.

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings:
> My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man that function
> Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not. (I.iii.130–42)

In verse of astonishing power, we feel Macbeth's shuddering, bottomless fall into a condition which the word 'terror' only weakly indicates. The weird women's prophecies, now partly confirmed, have opened him to an idea or a desire which comes in some sense from within, but which he can scarcely be said to have had until this moment. The terror stems from its content: imagining himself as murderer. But it stems also from the nature of the witness that is involved. The women have brought into life some secret or latent part of Macbeth's being. But what kind of life? They both do and do not belong to the external world. They are out there, on the heath, speaking to Banquo as well, and they are right about Macbeth's promotion to Cawdor. But they also melt away 'as breath into the wind' (I.iii.82). They are more than projections of the mind, yet the anchorage they offer the mind in the world, the corroboration that they

bring, is profoundly equivocal. 'Were such things here as we do speak about?', asks Banquo (I.ii.83). Their anchorage in reality is as 'imperfect' as the story that they tell. And this is where the terror lies: Macbeth's buried fantasy has been half-exposed, half-recognised and half-realised by external witness, but yet is not securely supported. 'Nothing is / But what is not.' The engulfing reality of what is 'but fantastical' erodes the solidity of the external here-and-now: whatever fearful thing might be actually present is less, far less, than 'horrible imaginings'.

We might note in passing that Macbeth's speech repeats, in verse of much greater intensity, the speech of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* as he contemplates the murder of Caesar.

> Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,
> I have not slept.
> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream:
> The Genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in council; and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection. (II.i.61–69)

Cassius's words worked on Brutus like the weird women's words on Macbeth, and Brutus, like Macbeth, was transported into that phantasmal, interim condition evoked by the experience of prolonged sleeplessness, in which the inner life of fantasy runs loose in search of some footing in the world. *Julius Caesar* was the first in the great sequence of Shakespeare's tragedies, and it is arguable that this sense of *phantasma*, of radical confusion between inner and outer worlds, or between the realms of desire and action, was the impetus for much that followed.

The anxiety generated by this liminal condition is such that Macbeth will do anything to get beyond it. It is sometimes said that Macbeth is the tragedy of ambition (the crime and punishment story), but Macbeth never sounds greatly ambitious, nor much looks forward to ruling as King. It could almost be said that he kills Duncan in order to give substance to the image of his fear, to find for it an object in the world, to

turn it into a conceivable story that can then be put behind him. If we must speak of motive at all, it makes more sense to see him as driven by fear, by the need to put an end to the unbearable anxiety which this imperfect speaking has induced. Lady Macbeth asks the tremendous question: 'Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou art in desire?' (I.vii.39–41). Kingship, as a symbolic idea, is that state against which her question would have no leverage, a state in which desire seamlessly becomes act. *Le roi le veut*, the king's will is law. But meanwhile—and Macbeth is much concerned with the meanwhile—there is nothing but radical fear, radical insecurity, in their appallingly slow convergence.

The weird women activate what is 'fantastical' within Macbeth, but they then offer his fantasy-life only a shadowy support. The fuller support comes from his wife, perfectly attuned to her husband's barely spoken 'imaginings', and able to reflect them back to him with the assurance that they do indeed belong in the world. In the first two acts of the play, the Macbeths know each other more intimately than any other couple in Shakespeare. It is this intimate understanding which allows Lady Macbeth to recognise and affirm those 'black and deep desires' which, by himself, Macbeth can hardly bear to look steadily at (I.iv.51). She understands his conflicted condition, too—up to a point—well enough:

> Yet do I fear thy nature,
> It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win. [...] Hie thee hither,
> That I may pour my spirits in thine ear ... (I.v.16–26)

That extraordinary image of the milk of human kindness conveys the nurturing aspect of her relationship with him. If Macbeth is her warrior-husband and sexual partner, he is also at some level an unweaned child. There is great insight in her intuiting that their relationship reaches down to this primal level, but also great blindness. For what she proposes is a harsh weaning. She finds something derisory in Macbeth's conflicted

state, in the persistence of infant tenderness into adult life. To displace that milk, she will pour her spirits into him—an unmaternal feeding, not unlike that which she offers to the spirits that tend on mortal thoughts:

> Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall. (I.v.47–48)

Three times in this first part of the play Lady Macbeth refers to mother's milk,[64] and always with this dual implication of herself as capable of giving but also of withholding or failing in that primal intimate support.

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
> Have done to this. (I.vii.54–59)

It is a specifically maternal power that Macbeth recognises in her when she enables his resolution to commit the murder: 'Bring forth men-children only!' (I.vii.72) The play's obsession with children—their murder, their survival and continuance—circles round the question of whether a child's sensibility is compatible with living an adult's life. Her repeated appeals to Macbeth to be 'a man' are primarily to his masculinity, but they also, I think, involve the demand that in being an adult male he no longer be a child, not be 'the baby of a girl', in the phrase that Macbeth half-uses about himself in his terror before Banquo's ghost (III.iv.105). Hence, although she understands that Macbeth is fearful, she cannot enter into the terrible intensity of that fear, in the way that a good enough mother enters into her child's fear. She cannot 'hold' it for him and with him. At the moment of crisis in the murder scene, she understands that his terror is that of a child, but does not (or dares not) understand how much that means:

64 The milk of Macbeth's traumatic weaning surfaces again near the end of the play in 'whey-face', his brutally contemptuous term for the serving-boy who is pale with terror. Cowards like children are full of milk where there should instead be blood.

Macbeth: I'll go no more.
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.
Lady Macbeth: Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. (II.ii.47–52)

The one moment in which her resolution falters is when she remembers herself as child—that is, acknowledges that you never entirely cease to be the child that you were. 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't' (II.ii.12–13). But otherwise, in the name of adult rationality, she repudiates the child's susceptibility to being engulfed by their inner life—a susceptibility which adult consciousness must bracket off as *mere* fantasy, the mere *painting* of a devil.

In the banquet scene, this splitting apart gets its full dramatic realisation. Macbeth's participation in social reality is shattered by the intrusion of Banquo's ghost, a reality which is real only to him, while his wife tries but fails to mediate between the two worlds. The only 'story' she can imagine that would support his behaviour is again cast in dismissive terms, as belonging merely to the domestic world of women:

O, these flaws and starts
(Imposters to true fear) would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authoriz'd by her grandam. (III.ii.62–65)

Richard II had imagined such a scene of female story-telling as a site of real value; in *The Winter's Tale*, the child's story of sprites and goblins is acknowledged as 'powerful' by the women and, in effect, by the play. But for Lady Macbeth here such women's stories, which mother-figures might 'authorise', are things to be outgrown, discarded with contempt, irrelevant to the business of real life. She is not only unable to see the ghost, but more importantly unable to grant the reality of her husband's terror. As if in response to what she cannot give him, Macbeth will decide to return to the weird sisters, those other female tellers of stories, in the search for some narrative that will bring relief to his present terrors. But they will prove once again to be only 'imperfect speakers'.

The relationship between the Macbeths was already shown to be breaking down in the wonderful scene between them before Banquo's murder. Lady Macbeth begins by reaching out to her husband, although fearful that she can no longer reach him:

> How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,
> Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
> Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
> With them they think on? (III.ii.8–11)

Not the least tragic aspect of the play is her desolation at the growing understanding that she is losing him to the world of 'fancies'; his mental anguish has a hold on him that she cannot cajole or bully or reason him out of. He no longer sleeps, or more precisely, his sleep is only nightmare, given over to 'these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly' (III.ii.18–19): the border between nightmare and waking consciousness has all but disappeared. 'O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!'; one barely feels that he means this as metaphor (III. ii.36). He is on the verge of, if not already given over to, madness; his consuming terror of Banquo and Fleance, of how the unfinished story might yet turn out, is evident paranoia, a projection of the dark world of his mind. Yet in this play, and when we hear this verse, we cannot think this dark world of threat unreal: we know it is in some sense out there, as the witches are.

> Macbeth: Then be thou jocund; ere the bat hath flown
> His cloister'd flight, ere to black Hecat's summons
> The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
> Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done
> A deed of dreadful note.
> Lady Macbeth: What's to be done?
> Macbeth: Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
> Till thou behold the deed. Come, seeling night,
> Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
> And with thy bloody and invisible hand
> Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
> Which keeps me pale! (III.ii.40–45)

Macbeth withholds full knowledge of his intentions from her, as he had never done before. A gap is widening between them, as his mind spirals within its vortex. Yet he is also trying thereby to protect her. There is momentary tenderness as well as horror, brilliantly conveyed in feeling the tenderness of the eye which the night stitches shut, with a sensitivity that both belies and underlies the flinch from 'beholding the deed'. For all the vertiginous force of his incantatory lines, Macbeth is simultaneously attempting to give comfort to his dear wife. 'Be thou jocund', 'dearest chuck'—these expressions of intimacy and affection co-exist extraordinarily with the dreadful thing that he intends and the dreadful place that his mind is now in. But that is the point: he addresses her, still, as someone who might be able to share and hold this experience with him; it is through their relationship that all this blood and horror may yet be connected back to a good world which holds their good marriage. For Macbeth, their relationship holds, in Winnicott's terms, the 'hope that there is a live relationship between inner reality and external reality, between innate primary creativity and the world at large which is shared by all'.[65] That relationship is, however, breaking up before our eyes; she speaks less and less in this scene, dismayed or overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings, feelings that take him ever further from her. Once so extraordinarily close, they are now breaking apart, as a direct consequence of how well she knew and understood his mind. Hence the scene's immense irony, inseparable from its immense and terrible pathos.

After the banquet scene, which confirms the widening abyss between them, they are never again together. In the sleepwalking scene in the final act, she has taken over his sleep-disrupting nightmares, and the two figures who witness this, the waiting-gentlewoman and the doctor, cannot engage with her, as if a glass wall had descended between her mind and the world of others. Like Beckett's silent Auditor, although they stand in the place of witnesses, they cannot properly tell of what they have heard and seen. 'I think, but dare not speak' (V.i.79). Only the doctor's extraordinary exclamation, 'God, God forgive us all!' (V.i.75), suggests a moment of recognition, of imaginable kinship.

65 D. W. Winnicott, 'Further Thoughts on Babies as Persons', in *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.90.

Finally, when Macbeth hears of the death of his wife, the person who came closest to entering into what he feels, the collapse of narrative possibility is rendered complete. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written that 'time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative.' [66] Macbeth's great speech of desolation despairs of any narrative arc to life ('Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow ...', V.v.19) and with it all notion that a life is something about which a meaningful story could be told.

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (V.v.24–28)

One of the blessings of having a tellable story is the possibility of closure. A tellable story confirms that a life, or a given portion of a life, has shape and direction, and however disturbing its events may have been, there is the possibility of standing outside them, and the hope that distress is not perpetual, boundless, subjectively as eternal as damnation. Macbeth's speech makes this connection in its negative form: it is impossible to tell a story, and likewise impossible to get to an end. This is what the death of his wife means, what it terribly brings home.

> She should have died hereafter.
> There would have been a time for such a word. (V.v.17–18)

Macbeth's response to the news of her death—conveyed in the first place by a great wordless 'cry of women'—is that there is no time now, in the heat of battle, to mourn his wife; to hold her funeral, say, and in particular to find the language which her death demands. Hereafter would have yielded such a time. And then he hears what he is saying, and reflects with infinite bitterness that the time for such a word *never* arrives, that life is an endless series of anticipations and regrets in which the work of mourning can never take place, and the story of pain can never be told.

66 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) I, p.3.

Mourning and ending

In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Gillian Rose distinguishes between what she calls 'inaugurated mourning' and a mourning which is 'aberrated' or 'incomplete', an endless melancholia which she links to the failure or renunciation of representation. Her thought is that successful representation, making 'the suffering of immediate experience visible and speakable',[67] overcomes estrangement from the world of others, opening the possibility of a return to that world. In the context of bereavement, this means acknowledging

> the law that decrees the absence of the other, the necessity of relinquishing the dead one, returning from devastating inner grief to the law of the everyday and of relationships, old and new, with those who live.[68]

'Relinquishing' and 'returning' should not be heard as unduly upbeat, for Rose is speaking more of a particular way of embracing grief than of passing beyond it. Acknowledging the law that decrees the absence—or separateness—of the beloved other is also to acknowledge the pain the law inflicts.[69] Yet without such acknowledgement, 'there can be no work, no exploring of the legacy of ambivalence, working through the contradictory emotions aroused by bereavement',[70] and the mind

67 Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.36.

68 Ibid., p.70.

69 One way of showing this is through the difference between Rose's distinction between good and bad modes of mourning and that made by Freud in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. In that essay, Freud sees continuing attachment to someone who has died as a kind of misapprehension of reality, which a healthy mourning process properly effaces. Since the loved person now lives only in the mind, attachment to them is to nothing, to a mirage. The readmission of the world replaces grief, in a kind of zero-sum game. But Rose's conception, unhappy with such firm oppositions, speaks more helpfully to the mourning which much great tragedy bequeaths us, acknowledging rather the necessity of grief, which now accompanies the readmission of the world. What lives only in the mind may still be vital to us. What is ended is not grief but grief's unbearable aspect and its usurpation of the world. This means that it can be communicated, spoken, or otherwise tolerably represented, that it can be received and taken in—not that it is displaced or diminished. 'Keep your mind in hell, and despair not' is the epigraph to *Love's Work*, Rose's personal memoir written alongside *Mourning Becomes the Law* as she approached her own death; the two works stand in several respects as commentaries upon one another.

70 Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p.70.

remains trapped, as Macbeth is, within the past's endless recurrence, with a future that never arrives.

A simple example of achieved mourning comes at the end of *Macbeth*, when Siward is brought news of his son's death in the battle:

> Siward: Then he is dead?
> Ross: Ay, and brought off the field. Your cause of sorrow
> Must not be measur'd by his worth, for then
> It hath no end.
> Siward: Had he his hurts before?
> Ross: Ay, on the front.
> Siward: Why then, God's soldier be he!
> Had I as many sons as I have hairs,
> I would not wish them to a fairer death.
> And so his knell is knoll'd.
> Malcolm: He's worth more sorrow,
> And that I'll spend for him.
> Siward: He's worth no more;
> They say he parted well, and paid his score,
> And so God be with him! (V.ix.9–19)

The nature and meaning of Young Siward's death are perfectly visible, fully represented by the public meaning of 'his hurts before' (i.e. he was facing his enemy, not running away). This fact successfully tells the story of how he died, and so the possibility that grief for him might have 'no end', although acknowledged, is passed through and decisively set aside—not least because the 'cause of sorrow' is shared and shareable by others. We don't doubt that his funeral rites—here compressed into the knell that is knolled—will provide fitting closure.

Young Siward's exemplary death is a very clean case, and one would hesitate to call it tragic; it sits in the play to demonstrate what, post-Macbeth, has become possible. Siward's grief is not engulfing; it does not dim the lights on the world. Much closer to the tragic is the grief of Macduff, where an all-but-unspeakable event elicits an unspeakable anguish.[71] In such situations the task of proper representation is very

71 Shakespeare does not show us where or whether Macduff's grief will have an end. But it is noticeable that he is willing, if Macbeth yields, to take him alive. This feels like something other than insatiable vengefulness.

much harder, for all the reasons this book has tried to suggest. If, in Gillian Rose's terms, representation of our suffering reconciles us to the world, it is likewise true that successful representation requires an audience, and the task of finding a good witness to estrangement or extreme anguish is immensely problematic. In tragedies of madness, it is acutely possible that the inner life of passion will find 'no end' in the words of others or in external form—just as 'there is no end' to what Hieronimo required of the impossible painting that would represent his grief, in the scene from *The Spanish Tragedy* discussed in chapter four. Macbeth's 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' epitomises that endless pursuit of an unreachable finality that has been his throughout:

> If it were done, when 'tis done ... (I.vii.1)

or

> Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect ... (III.iv.20)

or

> What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom? (IV.i.117)

'She should have died hereafter' crystallises this endless deferral, this endless failure of representation, in the funeral that Lady Macbeth will never have, because the time for the right, the conclusive word will never arrive.[72] I say 'conclusive', but a more capacious term might be 'releasing'. It is natural in relation to a death to think in terms of release as closure—the funeral rite, the funeral eulogy—and natural also for a mind in torment like Macbeth's to cast hope no further than the cessation of present anguish. But the function of a good funeral is to make possible a return to life in the world; Macbeth's anguish is boundless because the world does not exist for him beyond what his mind has made of it. (What his actions have made his actual environment into—the Scotland of howls and cries—is the secondary effect of this: though not, of course, secondary for others.) Thus we can say that the end of which Macbeth

72 One might think here also of the 'maimed rite' of Ophelia's funeral—maimed twice over, first by the restriction of ceremony for a suspected suicide, and then by Hamlet's melodramatic intervention, ranting at Laertes for his failure properly to mourn Ophelia, a failure of mourning in which he evidently shares.

despairs would be his discovery of a world separate from him in which he can live, and the timely word of which he despairs would be the word which would represent and recognise his anguish, coming from that separate world, from another's voice. It would bring an end to madness.

The movement which Macbeth cannot make is staged by the play itself. There is a strong contrast between Macbeth's traumatised experience of endless recurrence, in which the past is never 'done' and so can never be told, and the extraordinary momentum of *Macbeth* the play, which moves so rapidly and inevitably towards conclusion. Its clarity of narrative line is felt as a movement from Macbeth's inner life out to the external world. In the first two acts, and above all in the scenes around the murder of Duncan, we are drawn intimately into Macbeth's state of mind, which fills and colours the whole of the dramatic reality. This is achieved through the extraordinary intensity of the verse, and through the way the cosmos itself responds to his being—in, for example, the host of unnatural phenomena that take place on the night of the murder. If these express the reaction of the cosmos to atrocity, they also make manifest his own self-horror. Like the ghost of Banquo, they are in a certain sense the creations of his mind granted theatrical reality, and in them the play bears witness to the overwhelming reality of his mental state.[73] But this changes, as the world of the play gradually separates itself from the world of his mind, and we come increasingly to see him as a figure within a world that is larger than his tormented consciousness. This shift is apparent in the treatment of the three main killings. Duncan's murder matters in the play primarily for its effect on Macbeth, as an event in his consciousness; the killing is not made present to us but exists above all as the intensification of Macbeth's terror, the blood on his hands and in his mind. (Its apprehension was

73 Consider the contrasting case of Othello, immediately after he has killed Desdemona:
O insupportable! O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration. (V.ii.98–101)
It should, but it doesn't; there is no eclipse, no earthquake, no support from the environment for Othello's consequently 'insupportable' sense of what he has done, no recognition by the cosmos of the tremendous nature of his deed. There is a ghastly logic to this; he has killed the woman who once embodied his sense that he was truly known and recognised, who made good the living connection between his primal self and the external world. The collapse into bottomless dread that he now experiences is extreme.

from the outset 'fantastical', a psychic reality more horrible than any actuality could be.) Somewhat similarly, it is not the reality of Banquo's death that unmans Macbeth, but the equivocal reality of Banquo's ghost, another horrible imagining where what should remain within, like blood, is made appallingly visible. Yet there is also a shift; we get to see Banquo's murder, and this scene of Macbeth's reaction is not private to the Macbeths but happens in the social world of the dinner-guests. By the time we come to the murder of Macduff's family, this killing matters entirely in and for itself, as an event in the world, brutal rather than nightmarish. It may rise up into Lady Macbeth's nightmares ('The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?', V.i.42–43) but we observe these, with the Doctor, from the outside. In parallel with this shift, what were symbolic or supernatural realities—in the play's collusion with Macbeth's self-horror and paranoia—become naturalised: so the forest itself rising against Macbeth, as in nightmare, becomes a device of military camouflage. Our intense absorption in Macbeth's subjectivity drains gradually away: we exhale, we find ourselves able to take stock, to watch from a greater and safer distance.

One moment in this transition is marked with particular clarity: the porter scene. The knocking on the gate at the end of the murder scene is the realisation of Macbeth's self-horror. It is the world conforming and answering to his fear, the cosmos as an extension of his mind. It triggers his deranged-but-psychically-compelling belief that the blood can never be washed from his hands, but will instead stain all the waters of the ocean. But the knocking is also the sound of the external world breaking in, and as it persists into the following scene it changes its character, for it comes to be incorporated into the porter's comic routine.

> Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of Hell Gate, he should have old turning the key. Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Belzebub? Here's a farmer, that hang'd himself on th' expectation of plenty. Come in time! Have napkins enow about you, here you'll sweat for't. Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator. (II.iii.1–11)

Macbeth feels himself to be a damned soul; the porter's figuring of himself as porter of hell-gate has its grim point. But the tonality of the speech is this-worldly. It is outward-turning, delivered at least half to the audience; it is familiar and contemporary in its reference; its sardonic humour roots the idea of damnation in the life of the commonplace, the only-too-familiar. The porter, we immediately know, cannot be touched by tragedy, but leads a separate existence in a world that its destructiveness will not reach, and reminds us that such a world exists. (The gravediggers in *Hamlet* have a similar effect.) When he speaks of transgression and damnation, from his appropriately transitional place at the gate between inside and outside, he makes Winnicott's 'live relationship' between the vortex of Macbeth's subjectivity and 'the world at large which is shared by all'.[74] He does so precisely by *playing at being* the porter of hell, by a fiction-making which reminds us of what the drama itself is doing. This will lead, still, to horror; we are terribly aware of what the visitors are about to find. But the movement of the second half of the play, the readmission of the world, has begun.

This is not a matter of simply displacing the fantastical by the real, madness by sanity. We have entered too deeply into Macbeth's inner life for that. When, in the final speech of the play, Malcolm refers to 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' (V.ix.35), we are startled and I think saddened to discover that such a summary is, in its way, perfectly accurate. For it is wholly inadequate to our experience of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—our participation in their experience—earlier in the play. It fails to tell their story. The play offers us a kind of grief or mourning, not so much for their deaths, nor even for the progressive dehumanisation of Macbeth, as for the impossibility of 'holding' Macbeth's inner life to the end. As the play re-establishes the reality of the external world, we mourn the necessity of giving up the electrifying intensities of its early scenes, with a mourning the lonelier for being unshared by any character on stage. To mourn this necessity is not to valorise Macbeth's actions or motives, but to have felt the fascination of his inner life as a vital reality without which the Scottish state—and the play—are obscurely the poorer. Such mourning is a way of bearing witness, of making that live connection between inner life and external world which the Macbeths cannot sustain, a failure which manifests in them as madness.

74 Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, p.90; quoted earlier.

King Lear

Lear as child

In discussing *King Lear*, and in particular the madness of Lear, I want to begin where the play begins, by thinking about Lear's need. What it is that he is asking for when he requires his children to express their love for him? He is readily satisfied by the hyperbolic assurances of Goneril and Regan. These are, however, merely the appetisers to the great feast he eagerly expects when Cordelia will speak, his favourite, the daughter he loves the most, the daughter who—as he knows and expects—loves him the most. It is by getting what he wants here that Lear will feel able to give away his kingdom, as if Cordelia's love guaranteed him against any real loss in his giving up of power. When what he is asking for is denied (by Cordelia here; by Goneril and Regan later), this generates a convulsion of denial and rage which will take him into madness.

Lear's response to the frustration of his desire is infantile. From that obvious point, it is only a small further step to say that his original demand for love is likewise infantile. But 'infantile' is a pejorative term, carrying the view that infant sensibility shall not survive into adult life in any significant way; it is also a dismissive term, confident that such behaviour can or should be put in its place. If we think entirely of Lear's childishness in that way (which is Goneril's and Regan's way), I believe we lose the drama from the outset. That Lear begins as egotistical, foolish, and tyrannical is not in doubt: but Shakespeare asks us also to enter into the depth of Lear's need, for which the situation of a young child provides, at the least, a helpful analogy.

Let us return to the thinking about child development touched on earlier. In the first stages of life, the child's vulnerability and dependency are terrifyingly total. The unbearable anxiety which this would cause if fully registered is held at bay by the subjective sense of omnipotence: that is, the sense that the world, insofar as it gets registered at all as an external environment, conforms itself reliably to the child's inner life. This—the omnipotence of '*His Majesty the Baby*', in Freud's phrase[75]—is crucial to the basic security needed for the development of a self unappalled by the conditions of existence. What Winnicott emphasised was how this sense of omnipotence is made possible through the supportive presence

75 Freud, 'On the Introduction of Narcissism', p.376.

of another person. If the baby's desires are not to engulf him in anxiety, dread, and rage, they have to be immediately met, as if by magic. The first intimations of hunger generate food, as the good mother meets the baby's desire in the moment of its formation. And the infant's other passions are similarly met by being acknowledged, recognised, and 'held', unconditionally, as if the mother's loving awareness were infinite and beyond any possibility of fluctuation or shortfall.

Of course, there must come development beyond this. The mother is not to support the child forever in this magical condition of mind, which in an adult would be delusion or psychosis. This development, in Winnicott's view, happens of itself. The nurturing mother is not magical, but belongs to the real world, and will sometimes be slow to understand and slow to provide. The good mother will be, in Winnicott's famous phrase, 'good enough', not perfect, not flawlessly the magical function of the child's desire. This imperfection, this capacity for occasional but mendable failure, is functional; she gradually but inevitably brings with her the intuition of a world beyond the child's psyche, separate from it and potentially resistant to it. But the weaning from omnipotence needs to be gradual. It is only if these intimations of a separate external world are accompanied by much reassuring support, much counterbalancing sense of pliancy, that the child can begin to acknowledge the existence of a world where his writ does not always run. Only in this way can the abdication from omnipotence tolerably take place.

The most obvious figure of omnipotence in Shakespeare is the King—whose word is law, whose utterance is performative, who operates within a court of supporters and flatterers. In practice, Shakespeare's kings do not enjoy unlimited power, but exist in a world of opponents and constraints. But some, at least, feel entitled to such a power, are resentful of limitation; they know that this is what kingship means or ought to mean. *Richard II* is Shakespeare's first great study of the grief involved in the loss of the dream of omnipotence. Richard denies to the last possible moment the pressure of external realities. If others abandon him, then angels and even stones will fight for him against the rebels. Our perception of this as delusion, the last stand of a narcissist, is mightily complicated by the Elizabethan idea of the sanctity of kingship, as well as by the soaring lyricism of his verse. Something immense does seem to be at stake. When political reality finally forces itself upon him, his

sense of privation and annihilation is total. His fall as he experiences it is not into some humbler human state, with all its ordinary and familiar limitations, but radical: if he is not King, then he is nothing at all.

> I have no name, no title,
> No, not that name was given me at the font,
> But 'tis usurp'd. Alack the heavy day,
> That I have worn so many winters out
> And know not now what name to call myself! (IV.i.255–59)

> Bolingbroke: Are you contented to resign the crown?
> Richard: Ay, no, no ay; for I must nothing be. (IV.i.200–01)

That word 'nothing' comes back in Richard's dungeon soliloquy:

> Then am I king'd again, and by and by
> Think that I am unking'd by Bullingbrook,
> And straight am nothing. But what e'er I be,
> Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
> With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
> With being nothing. (V.v.36–41)

'Nothing' marks the complete disintegration of the self when unsupported by the world. Both the word and the idea will come back insistently in *King Lear.*

Richard has kingship torn from him: an abrupt, traumatic weaning. Lear of course chooses to give away his kingdom—while specifying that he will still keep 'the name, and all th' addition to a king' (I.i.136). What he means by this is expressed in his demand that his daughters profess their love. As Goneril and Regan well understand, what he is asking for here is the confirmation of a love that is unconditional and total, that makes their own existence utterly subservient to the caring attention they lavish upon him. Their assurances may be impossible and gross, if heard as the words of one adult to another, but they also accurately express what the young child needs to feel is the case, that the nurturing figure lives only and extremely for him.

Lear the old man is very close to being a young child: his neediness, his tantrums, his self-absorption, his sense of mischief—all speak of this. 'Old fools are babes again', as Goneril puts it, who speaks as the

advocate of a hard school of parenting (I.iii.19). The Fool refers to him as a child—someone who 'mad'st thy daughters thy mothers' (I.iv.172–73). And in the terrible scene with blind Gloucester, when Lear says, 'Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air / We wawl and cry', it is as if that first smelling of the air after birth is a recent experience, a still vivid memory (IV.vi.179–80). At the start of the play, Lear may formally be putting aside the omnipotence of the King, but only, as he intends, to be embraced by the equally total assurance of support which the young child demands, as in retirement he 'crawls' toward death. We may see this as a wilfully blind denial of the loss of power which aging exacts. But it may be truer to credit Lear with some dim intuition that if he is to give up power, to accept his mortal condition, this is a process so terrifying and dismaying that he will need all Cordelia's loving support if he is to survive it. For Cordelia, he is sure, will be found to 'love us most' (I.i.51), and how much this matters is expressed in his choking disappointment when it is denied:

> I lov'd her most, and thought to set my rest
> On her kind nursery. (I.i.123–24)

'Her kind nursery' may stand well enough for what Winnicott understands by the 'holding' power of the good mother. Until this moment, as France wonderingly notes, Cordelia was Lear's 'best object' (I.i.214), his secure foothold for love in the external world. Her 'loving most' would have mirrored and confirmed his 'loving most'. (Her share of the kingdom was always to be the best.) That is, reality would wonderfully reciprocate the life of the mind.

To have this bluntly denied, to be made to confront an independent reality that is resistant to such desire, is intolerable. Lear explodes with rage and hurt: his connection with Cordelia now means a terrible vulnerability and must be utterly repudiated. Suddenly strange to him, she must become the stranger to whom all welcome is denied:

> 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 barbarous Scythian,
> Or he that makes his generation messes

To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbor'd, pitied, and reliev'd,
As thou my sometime daughter. (I.i.113–20)

Lear's imagination has, like Othello, been among the anthropophagi: in this case, those who feed upon their own children. The image of being kindly nursed is set against a horrible ingestion, an aggressive hunger that both destroys and internalises the child. Although Lear loudly thrusts such barbarous hunger away from himself, the structure of his sentence also acknowledges his secret affinity with that desire. This image of the parent devouring his children, annihilating them as separate beings, functions as the absolute denial of familial dependency, whose terrors are thereby displaced into a more manageable and more disavowable form. The image makes a ghostly reappearance at the end of the second act in relation to his other daughters, when Lear desperately asserts his vanishing omnipotence:

I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall—I will do such things—
What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth! (II.iv.279–82)

These lines recall (even as they shrink from recalling) the exact moment in Seneca's *Thyestes* when Atreus hatches his plan to feed Thyestes his own children.[76] If Lear is the terrified unsupported child, he is also the malignant, destructive parent of whom the child is terrified, each position amplifying the other. He threatens to banish or devour his daughters or, as he does with Goneril, to curse them with sterility or with offspring deformed in mind and body—a curse on fertility that, in the storm, becomes universal: 'all germains spill at once / That makes ingrateful man!' (III.ii.8–9).

It is easy—and in one sense obviously right—to be critical of Lear as a monster of egotism, who cannot conceive of love as a relationship between adults. Cordelia's suitors are waiting in the wings; she is about to become an adult, a married woman. Lear knows this in a notional way, but seems to understand nothing of what it means. (Unless indeed

76 Seneca, *Thyestes*, lines 269–270.

he cannot bear to understand what it means, and the love-test is his way of ensuring that he will never truly give Cordelia away: she must either put her father above all other loves, or be rendered unmarriageable, in another version of the curse on fertility.) But to settle for being critical of Lear is to slight the intolerable hurt caused by the denial of his need. In the scenes that follow, the position of being merely critical is occupied by Goneril and Regan, who continue the process that Cordelia had begun. They do so more proactively and callously, but their refusal to indulge their father is continuous with hers. His hundred knights are what he reserves to himself of his abdicated kingship, his crucial reassurance that although he no longer has power, he still or 'really' has power, that some part of the external world remains pliant to his will and is therefore a safe environment for him to place his love.

> My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
> That all particulars of duty know,
> And in the most exact regard support
> The worships of their name. (I.iv.263–66)

They are Lear's comfort blanket, his favourite toy. But they are 'unnecessary', and as Goneril correctly perceives, they support in Lear an unreal fantasy of power, 'these dispositions which of late transport you / From what you rightly are' (I.iv.221–22). And so Goneril and Regan whittle the knights away, down to fifty, down to twenty-five, until—'what need one?'—there is nothing left (II.iv.263). However we understand the daughters' motivation here—a mixture of distaste for disorder, pre-emptive strike against their father's anger, and a pleasure, perhaps sadistic, in feeling their own power—the effect is to bring Lear up abruptly against an external world that yields not at all to his will, and confronts him only with what he 'rightly' is:

> O sir, you are old,
> Nature in you stands on the very verge
> Of his confine. You should be rul'd and led
> By some discretion that discerns your state
> Better than you yourself. (II.iv.146–50)

> I pray you, father, being weak, seem so. (II.iv.201)

Lear's stupefaction at finding his messenger in the stocks is another moment in this process. As the King's emissary, Kent-as-Caius should have been immune to prosecution or punishment—yet, bewilderingly, impossibly, it is not so. This external world proves to be as unaccommodating, as hostile, as could have been feared; the former king is brought up against the extremity of utter dependency.

Lear's best hope of managing this growing perception of a hostile world lies in his relationship with the Fool, who offers support for his inner life that is both sympathising and realistic. The Fool can be played in two ways: as the boy that Lear calls him, or as little younger than Lear himself, being Lear's long-time entertainer and companion. But in either case, the Fool is simultaneously old and young. He seems to have much experience of how the world goes: but in his foolery, his doggerel songs and rhymes, his mischievous nonchalance, he evokes, without exactly inhabiting, a child's playfulness and irresponsibility. It is the Fool who most acutely recognises that Lear is still, in some important sense, a child:

> Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?
> Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away, that thou wast born with. (I.iv.148–50)

> Lear: When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?
> Fool: I have us'd it, nuncle, e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers. (I.iv.170–73)

This is critical: but the Fool is also acknowledging where Lear really is. Making his daughters his mothers is exactly what Lear was trying to do (demanding from them a mother's unconditional love), impracticable though that had to be. Both Lear's questions to the Fool gesture at asserting the sober authority of adulthood; the Fool, however, turns each question back into a revelation of Lear's childishness. Beneath the movement of challenge and counter-challenge, we feel the rhythm of the double-act in which Lear's straight man colludes with, even looks for, the comical answer which turns adult interrogation into the play of repartee. If these exchanges are overtly antagonistic, they also carry the sense of Lear and the Fool playing together, as children play. To understand Lear is to understand that he is more of a child than an adult, or that he is a child wearing the mask of an adult (the political responsibilities which

Lear wants to discard), or that he is someone in whom the child and the adult are radically confused. By offering himself as Lear's playfellow, the Fool offers permission for the Lear-child to exist and breathe and begin to know himself. (Lear hath ever but slenderly known himself.)

Like much good play, this incorporates elements of a threatening external reality: family relationships that can turn savagely destructive—

> For you know, nuncle,
> "The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
> That it had it head bit off by it young."
> So out went the candle, and we were left darkling. (I.iv.214–47)

—and the terror that, when support is removed, there is nothing but falling:

> Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now, I am a Fool, thou art nothing. (I.iv.192–94)

The Fool tells Lear that he was a fool to give away his power in a world of ruthless aggression. This indeed seems to be the case: but it is also to externalise and reflect back to Lear his subjective perception of a horrifying betrayal at the heart of things. It was this that triggered his rejection of Cordelia, and is now steadily growing as first Goneril and then Regan deny him the primal comfort he craves. They tell him, in severely adult manner, that his extremity of response is unreasonable, that a life of dependency without the comfort blanket of his knights is perfectly liveable. But this is to deny the reality of his rage and fear. It is for the Fool (a person not rigorously sane) to reflect his worst fears back to him: children devour their parents, the world is a heartless and persecutory place, and the family is no refuge at all but rather the great source of affliction.

> Fathers that wear rags
> Do make their children blind,
> But fathers that bear bags
> Shall see their children kind.
> Fortune, that arrant whore,
> Ne'er turns the key to th' poor.
> But for all this, thou shalt have as many dolors for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year. (II.iv.48–55)

The Fool tells Lear's story, as Lear increasingly fears and feels it to be. But he also tells it in the manner of a Fool: that is to say, as if in play, with a kind of playground nursery-rhyme nonchalance. As if to say: look, a child can know these things and remain a child. And also: look, look how we can make play with them, make a game of them, create word-play and double meanings out of them. And also: be reassured, I can enter into your fears, and I am not destroyed. (In a Winnicottian view of the psyche, a great part of the child's fear is that no-one could truly know what they feel without being destroyed by the experience.)

With regard to that last point, it matters that the Fool is felt to be in some sense immune from harm. As a 'licensed' being, he enjoys a measure of protection from punishment, and this extends to our sense that he is not vulnerable as others are vulnerable. This needs qualification; we are told that since Cordelia's banishment he has pined away, and in the third act it is possible, though not absolutely necessary, to play him as succumbing to the affliction of the storm. But in the first two acts he has a kind of blessed imperviousness. For all his unwavering fidelity to Lear, he is undistressed by Lear's distress; and although whipping is spoken of, we do not suppose that the Fool could be whipped, or that it would hurt him overmuch if it happened. This is reinforced by those moments when he addresses the audience directly:

> She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure,
> Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter. (I.v.51–52)

> This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time. (III.ii.95)

A character who can thus step outside the frame of the play seems likely to be safe from what happens within it.

All these qualities in the Fool, taken together, qualify him (for a while) to tell Lear's story, to offer him the kind of support that he really needs, reflecting the Lear-child's terrors back to him as realities, yet as realities that do not overwhelm and destroy but can be made play with, or even made a play of, in which other persons could also bearably appear. If part of Lear's terror is of being mocked in an infinite humiliation, the Fool presents himself as one who can mock Lear yet remain unswervingly loyal: as if he were offering the mockery as a gift, an extension of what he provides as entertainer. There is a marvellously

moving moment that suggests what this makes possible. After the confrontation with Goneril at the end of Act One, the Fool and Lear have an apparently gratuitous exchange:

> Fool: Shalt see thy other daughter will use thee kindly, for though she's as like this as a crab's like an apple, yet I can tell what I can tell.
> Lear: What canst tell, boy?
> Fool: She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab. Thou canst tell why one's nose stands i' th' middle on's face?
> Lear: No.
> Fool: Why, to keep one's eyes on either side's nose, that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into.
> Lear: I did her wrong.

The Fool has made no reference to Cordelia. Lear's ability to acknowledge, for the first time, a truth about her and about himself that stands beyond his fantasy-life, arises from within. Yet it can only arise out of the supportive environment which the Fool provides: glancing at Lear's unspoken fears and follies, showing that he has them fully in mind, yet also incorporating them within the world of playfellowship.

But for the most part, the Fool's support can do no more than hold at bay, for a time, that sense of radical vulnerability to which Goneril and Regan expose him. To be exposed in this way seems to Lear, and will soon become in the play, the stuff of psychic nightmare, paranoia made real. Rather than tolerate what is intolerable, he takes refuge in a rage that manifests itself as madness. This, Lear somewhere knows, is the only alternative to weeping, to the grief that would fully acknowledge how much is lost.

> You think I'll weep:
> No, I'll not weep.
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad! (II.iv.282–86)

His madness emerges at first in the fantastical assertion that he is, after all, powerfully supported: the gods are his audience, they hear and understand him and will identify with his cause, wreaking vengeance on the world that hurts him through the storm that sympathises with

his rage. In these passages Lear adopts the crime-and-punishment story, projecting the principal crime upon others. 'I am a man / More sinn'd against than sinning' (III.ii.59–60). Later, there is a more complete disintegration, a breaking into many flaws:

> No, they cannot touch me for coining, I am the King himself. […] Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper; draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do't. There's my gauntlet, I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O, well flown, bird! i' th' clout, i' th' clout. (IV.vi.83–92)

Lear replaces an intolerable world with a world of his own making. Within this world he can give orders, hand out money, make judgements, issue challenges. And he is immune from prosecution or harm: 'they cannot touch me for coining' (or in the Quarto, interestingly, 'for crying'). He is still 'the King himself'. Winnicott's characterisation of such disintegration of self in the young child seems relevant; he understands this as

> a sophisticated *defence*, a defence that is an active production of chaos in defence against unintegration in the absence of maternal ego-support, that is, against the unthinkable or archaic anxiety that results from failure of holding in the stage of absolute dependence. The chaos of disintegration may be as 'bad' as the unreliability of the environment, but it has the advantage of being produced by the baby and therefore of being non-environmental. It is within the reach of the baby's omnipotence.[77]

If we follow Winnicott's lead, we may say that Lear's is the voice of one who cannot imagine that he is heard or supported by the world. The arrival of Gloucester changes things, but not greatly. As the blind man becomes increasingly present to Lear as someone who might recognise him ('Is't not the King?', IV.vi.107), and so as someone he can afford to recognise ('I know thee well enough, thy name is Gloucester', IV.vi.177), Lear's language acquires more shape and meaning, tentatively envisaging an auditor or interlocutor. There are moments when Lear

77 Winnicott, 'Ego Integration in Child Development', in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*: *Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Karnac, 1990), p.61.

seems to be fooling with Gloucester—playing fool to sorrow, in Edgar's phrase—as the Fool once fooled with him; there are moving passages of fleeting coherence. But Gloucester and Edgar cannot take in very much of what Lear is feeling; they cannot 'gather' much of Lear, as one might say, in his disintegrated state. Their cries of dismay ('O thou side-piercing sight!', 'Alack, alack the day!', IV.vi.85, 181) reach little further than the 'gesture of helpless compassion' performed by Beckett's Auditor.

It will take the more truly attentive presence of Cordelia, in the following scene, for Lear to begin to put together some more coherent sense of himself. Her great speech of pity—

> Was this a face
> To be oppos'd against the warring winds?
> To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
> In the most terrible and nimble stroke
> Of quick cross lightning? to watch—poor perdu!—
> With this thin helm? ... (IV.vii.30–35)

—arrives in the play like water in the desert. Here at last is a place, a site of consciousness, where the immense pain of the play is being *felt*—not registered in shock and horror, but taken in as the source of grief. Her ability to imagine and support Lear's distress, without any trace of judgment or opposition, is a form, at last, of that 'kind nursery' which he looked for at the beginning. Its good effect is seconded by his discovery (which is also the play's discovery) that she is *still there for him*, that his rage has not, after all, had the fearful power to destroy her or drive her away or fill her with reproach—and therefore, crucially, that the separateness of the world can be benign as well as hostile. If Cordelia survives his hatred, then all things are possible.

The scene is one of great delicacy as well as great emotion. The delicacy lies in the sensitivity with which, little by little, the reality of the situation is admitted into Lear's consciousness. Waking from his long sleep, he sees the being whom he addresses as 'a soul in bliss', 'a spirit' (IV.vii.45, 48). No-one corrects him; 'let him alone awhile', says the wise doctor (IV.vii.50); and gradually, hesitantly, like blurry vision slowly coming into some degree of focus, he recognises the spirit as a lady, and the lady as 'my child Cordelia', whose tears, he carefully ascertains, have sensory existence—they are wet (IV.vii.68–70). The scalding tears

of his self-imagination as one of the damned are replaced by, or perhaps merge with, the actual tears of his daughter. Cordelia and Kent hang upon his words with intense attention, but say little, pressing nothing upon him, rather allowing him to take in just so much of their presence and his situation as he can bear. Then the doctor intervenes:

> Be comforted, good madam, the great rage,
> You see, is kill'd in him, and yet it is danger
> To make him even o'er the time he has lost.
> Desire him to go in, trouble him no more
> Till further settling. (IV.vii.77–81)

There is danger in admitting too much external reality too soon or in the wrong way; hence the extreme delicacy involved in Lear's transition from madness to something closer to sanity. 'Pray you now forget, and forgive' both begins to acknowledge the harm he has done and simultaneously fends off such knowledge, while admitting a hope that there may be, after all, no malevolence here, no retribution. 'I am old and foolish': a truth which was unbearable from Regan's mouth, he can now—in the presence of Cordelia—bear to begin to discover for himself (IV.vii.83).

It is an infinitely delicate and, in the doctor's word, dangerous matter, this rapprochement between madness and sanity, this adjusting of the passions of the mind to the contours of the world. The danger is negotiated, though not dispelled, by Cordelia's 'holding' of Lear's grief, by her attunement to his need. But now a large question presents itself: is it Cordelia who ministers to Lear in this scene, or it is the play? And in either case, is the support too much? The Cordelia who returns to Lear is a different figure from the independent-minded woman of the opening scene; she is the devoted daughter of his imaginative need, the daughter who loves her father all, and who has 'no cause' for anger at his treatment of her. When Lear misidentifies her as 'a spirit', this catches her near-symbolic quality, as if she were indeed a projection of his deepest need. Her whole identity may now seem to be comprehended in her being-there-for-him, and if we persist in regarding her as a separate person, we may worry at how far such devotion now defines her. The total concern and loving attention she offers Lear makes her the perfectly nurturing carer which an infant needs and desires, but which no adult

should expect from any relationship. Janet Adelman agonises with great precision about how to reconcile the moral beauty of the later Cordelia scenes with the challenge her subjection presents to any intelligently feminist awareness:

> Insofar as the Cordelia of 1.1 is silenced, insofar as we feel the Cordelia who returns more an as iconic presence answering Lear's terrible need than as a separate character with her own needs, Shakespeare is complicit in Lear's fantasy, rewarding him for his suffering by remaking for him the Cordelia he had wanted all along; Shakespeare too requires the sacrifice of her autonomy. This is a very painful recognition for a feminist critic, for any reader who reads as a daughter. [...] [And yet] how can we experience this play and not want Cordelia to return to Lear? And yet how can we want what Lear—what Shakespeare—does to her? It is easy enough simply to dissociate ourselves from Lear's need, to gender it male and thus escape its traces in ourselves; it is easy enough thus to mobilize anger against both the authors—literal and literary—that require Cordelia's sacrifice. And yet, if we allow the anger we mobilize to cut us off from the heart of longing embedded in Lear's suffering, do we not replicate Lear's own attempt to mobilize anger against vulnerability—this time our own? For the fantasies that determine the shape of Cordelia's return are, I think, only in part gendered; in part they spring from the ground of an infantile experience prior to gender.[78]

Such questions go to the root, I think, even if we need not feel the scene to be entirely one of wish-fulfilment, whether for us or perhaps even for Lear. Its joy is very close to grief. Something is shifting in Lear, some of his torment is passing from him, but his return from madness feels still tentative and precarious, still acutely apprehensive of pain. As the doctor says, it is much too early to speak of healing. Will Lear *ever* be able to 'even o'er the time he has lost', or does his simplicity of spirit depend upon a simple-mindedness which speaks of damage as well as grace? We hold our breath. An external world of harsh realities—most obviously figured by the imminent war, but containing much else that will be painful to remember—is suspended, rendered insignificant for now by Cordelia's presence, but it has not gone away.

78 Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.125.

The *Bacchae* and the death of Cordelia: grief, witness, and the theatre

These great tensions around the return of Cordelia and the play's 'complicity' or otherwise in Lear's need are most fully worked through at the end of the play, in Cordelia's death. But before attempting to speak about that—and to give myself a way of doing so—I would like to make an excursion to one more great tragedy of madness: the *Bacchae* of Euripides. In particular, I want to call up its comparably shattering final scene, in which another parent holds the dead body of their child, and with immense difficulty comes to see what it is that they hold in their hands.

The action of the *Bacchae* can be briefly told. Dionysus, a young, new god, is establishing his worship in Greece. But the people of Thebes, where Zeus sired him on the princess Semele, are resistant; Semele's sisters have denied the truth of the story of his divine origin. As punishment, or perhaps as a kind of forced conversion, the god has possessed all the women of Thebes with a divine frenzy; they have left the civilised space of the city and lead a life together on the mountains that is without inhibition, outside civilised norms. Now Dionysus comes to the city in person, in human form, as a foreigner who preaches the new cult. The young king, Pentheus (who is unknowingly his cousin) regards his influence as an intolerable threat to good order. He attempts to imprison the stranger and proposes to subdue the women on the mountain by force. But instead, the stranger-god possesses him with a great desire to spy on the women and watch their practices. Pentheus is induced to disguise himself, bizarrely, as a woman; he watches them from the trees, but Dionysus exposes him to them in his hiding-place as their common enemy. They joyously tear him apart, gifted with superhuman power. Chief among the women is Pentheus's mother, Agave; she returns to the city in triumph with what she believes to be the head of the lion that she has killed, but as her divine frenzy gradually fades, she recognises this as the head of her son.[79]

79 It will be seen that the action can be read as telling a story of crime and punishment. Agave and Pentheus both denied Dionysus, and they are duly made to suffer; the destruction of Pentheus is made the instrument of Dionysus's terrible retribution upon Agave. As is the way with great tragedy, this story accounts for everything and nothing. Yes, the energies of tragedy come from somewhere larger and deeper than everyday rationality can comprehend, and to insist that

There could hardly be a more striking example of the challenge, and the danger, of welcoming the stranger. If there was ever a moment when Dionysus could have been admitted without overturning the norms of the city, that moment is in the past; as things stand, what he now requires is submission to his influence, with no assurance of where that influence will lead. In one sense, of course, he *must* be admitted; he is a god of power, the energies that he embodies are real. The tragic theatre of Athens takes place in the theatre of Dionysus, part of the festival in his honour. But to bear true witness to Dionysus is difficult, for he blurs and dissolves distinctions, as a force impossible to categorise: foreigner yet native by birth, androgynous in manner, appearing both as god and as human, irresistibly enticing yet coldly punishing, alien and intimate, a 'terrible' god, 'but to men most gentle', as the chorus sing.[80] To seek to *apprehend* the energies of Dionysus, from some external point of vantage, would seem impossible. He easily evades imprisonment, overthrowing the buildings that seemed to contain him; when Pentheus's spies try to seize Agave, the women on the mountain—peaceful hitherto—become violent, in an awesome display of the power with which the god has inspired them. Trying to apprehend the energies of Dionysus from without transforms them from what they are in themselves into something that can only be experienced as destructive.

Hence the nature of the trap that Dionysus sets for Pentheus. The moment when the stranger-god asks Pentheus if he would like to *see* the women on the mountain is the moment Pentheus falls under his spell:

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such rationality is all-sufficient is an error that exposes one to disaster. But the punishment meted out is so disproportionate to the offence that it is impossible to feel, as part of our experience of the play, that justice in any sense is being done. (That Agave's original offence took place before the play began, and in dramatic terms is notional only, is relevant here.) Cadmus acknowledges their fault, but protests to Dionysus that 'your reprisals are too severe'. 'I am a god, and you insulted me', answers Dionysus, to which Cadmus responds that 'gods should not resemble men in their anger'. Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. by Geoffrey S. Kirk (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p.136. Greek gods often do, but Cadmus' insistence that human sympathies cannot be aligned with the god's-eye narrative of crime and punishment is overwhelmingly supported by the dramatic movement of the ending. The perception of justice done, or retribution exacted, or a life-lesson taught, feels like a minor matter by comparison with the real centre of our interest: Pentheus' doomed appeal to his mother, and his mother's terrible coming to mourn her son, which fills the ending sequence of the play.

80 Euripides, *The Bacchae*, p.94.

> Dionysus: Would you like to see them sitting close together, up in the hills?
>
> Pentheus: Very much indeed—I would give an untold weight of gold to do so!
>
> Dionysus: What, have you fallen into so great a passion for this?
>
> Pentheus: I should be pained to see them the worse for drink.
>
> Dionysus: Nevertheless you would enjoy seeing what causes you distress?
>
> Pentheus: Yes, you are right; but in silence, lying low under the firs.[81]

Resistance melts away; from this moment Pentheus is Dionysus' puppet, walking obediently into his trap. We can say that the god has taken his wits away, possessed him with madness; or, in terms that amount to the same thing, that he is flooded by the desire that civilisation has suppressed in him hitherto. Not that Pentheus fully acknowledges his desire; voyeur-like, he wishes to observe without participating, to witness from a place of safety. Euripides is surely glancing here at the audience of tragedy. 'You would enjoy seeing what causes you distress?' He invites us to reflect on the parallel between our situation and that of Pentheus, and on whether our position as witnesses to the action is as safely separate as it might seem.[82]

The special state of mind into which Dionysus has thrown Pentheus, in which he desires to approach a condition in which distinctions melt away, is expressed as a fantasy of maternal protection and support.

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81 Ibid., p.89.

82 I am reminded of the moment in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), when the Player asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if they would like to 'watch' a performance of the Rape of the Sabine Women.
Player: It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.
Rosencrantz: What are they?
Player: Indifferent.
Rosencrantz: Bad?
Player: Wicked.
Formally positioned as observers, like Pentheus they too will find themselves caught up in the action.

Dionysus: Follow, and I shall go as your escort and protector,
though another shall bring you back ...

Pentheus: Yes, my mother!

Dionysus: ... as a sight for all.

Pentheus: It is for this that I come.

Dionysus: You will be carried here ...

Pentheus: That is pampering me ...

Dionysus: ... in your mother's arms.

Pentheus: ... and you will make me really spoiled!

Dionysus: Yes, spoiled—in a special way.[83]

Dionysus speaks with chilling double meaning. But what moves Pentheus is the idea of being held and supported by his mother: like Lear's 'kind nursery', a blissful fantasy of regression to the ideal state of a young child. The god of tragedy has offered him what the writer 'A' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* sees as the essence of the tragic: when the individual renounces his claim to autonomy and acknowledges that he 'is still a child of God, of his age, of his nation, of his family, of his friends [...] he has the tragic', and thus understood, 'the tragic is infinitely gentle [...] it is a motherly love that lulls the troubled one'.[84]

In the event, having opened himself to this blissful desire, maternal recognition and support is exactly what Pentheus is denied.

First his mother started the slaughter as priestess
and falls upon him; he hurled away the snood
from his hair, for the wretched Agave to recognize
and not kill him—and says, touching
her cheek, "Look, it is I, mother, your child
Pentheus, whom you bore in the house of Echion!
Take pity on me, mother, and do not by reason of my
errors murder your own child!"
But she, discharging foam from her mouth and rolling

83 Euripides, *The Bacchae*, p.104. (Points of ellipsis as in the English text.)
84 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), Part I, p.145.

her eyes all round, her mind not as it should be,
was possessed by the Bacchic god; and her son did not persuade her.
Grasping his left arm below the elbow
and setting her foot against the unhappy man's ribs,
she tore his shoulder out, not by her normal strength,
but the god gave a special ease to her hands.[85]

Winnicott speaks of the failure of maternal support in the early months of life as inducing an unspeakable terror and anguish; he describes it as like finding oneself in a den of wild beasts. The mother who does not provide such support—who does not truly recognise the being of the child—may become, for the child, a figure of malignant power. And so Agave proves to be. The anticipation of a blissful cradling, of a 'kind nursery', encouraged and supported by the duplicitous god, turns in an instant to its terrible opposite, a tearing and rending at the hands of the mother who does not respond to her child's call. That Agave does this is part of what we may call the play's complicity with or realisation of the life of the psyche, its participation in energies beyond the patrol of sanity. Yet the passage also marks a crucial shift in the audience's location of delusion and reality. For much of the play, the energies of Dionysus are presented as overwhelmingly real: the women on the mountain seem to be introduced to a deeper mode of existence, and Pentheus' opposition seems puny and delusional. He believed he was binding the stranger, but Dionysus assures us he was deluded, and Pentheus' palace is then destroyed by fire and earthquake: the power of the drama is aligned with the power of Dionysus. But when, in the messenger speech, Pentheus confronts his mother, the location of reality shifts: it is his terror that we feel, not her ecstasy: the delusion is now all with his maddened mother, visibly and disturbingly deranged, 'her mind not as it should be'.

This structural movement that the drama induces in us is duplicated in the movement that Agave must now make, as over some thirty lines her father gradually dispels her ecstasy and, as we must feel, restores her to sanity:

85 Euripides, *The Bacchae*, pp.116–118.

Cadmus: First turn your gaze on this sky above.

Agave: There: why did you suggest I look at it?

Cadmus: Is it the same, or does it seem to you to be brighter?

Agave: It is brighter than before and shines with a holier light.

Cadmus: And is this passionate excitement still in your heart?

Agave: I do not understand this question—and yet I am somehow becoming in my full senses, changed from my previous state of mind. [...]

Cadmus: Whose head then, are you holding in your arms?

Agave: A lion's—at least, so the women hunters said?

Cadmus: Now consider truly—looking costs little trouble.

Agave: Ah, what do I see? What is this I am carrying in my hands?

Cadmus: Look hard at it and understand more clearly.

Agave: What I see is grief, deep grief, and misery for me!

Cadmus: It does not seem to you to resemble a lion?

Agave: No, but it is Pentheus' head I am holding, unhappy woman![86]

It is a dreadful transition that Agave makes, and that we make with her. Cadmus acknowledges this even as he facilitates it:

> Alas! if you all realize what you have done
> you will grieve with a dreadful grief; but if to the end
> you persist in your present condition,
> though far from fortunate, you will think you are free from misfortune.[87]

'You all' in the English registers that the Greek verbs are plural: 'you and the other women', primarily, but we may feel ourselves included, more participants in than spectators of the tragedy, engulfed by the enormous pathos of the scene, its 'dreadful grief'. Our relation to theatre is deeply

86 Ibid., pp.127–128.
87 Ibid., p.126.

implicated in this: when Cadmus asks Agave what head she holds in her hands, he uses the word *prosopon*, which more properly means face or mask, as in the mask worn by an actor in the theatre. The question of what it is that Agave holds is also a question about the potency of theatre. When she recognises the head as her son's, she uses a different word, *kara*, that can only mean head. The inherent doubleness of theatre, with its power to experience illusions or representations as realities even while knowing them for what they are, has hardened into a world of fixed and non-negotiable realities. The terrible transition that Agave makes, from ecstatic excitement to the dreadful sobriety of seeing what she holds in her hands, enacts in compressed form the transition that we are making as audience, from entering into the energies of Dionysus to contemplating their residue and aftermath. Agave is no longer filled with divine energy, but emerges into the sober, disillusioned seeing that belongs, now, indisputably to reality. Within the action of the play, these two states are incompatible: and we might say that tragedy is what results from their incompatibility. Alternatively, though, we might say that the total experience of the play holds the two states together, discounting neither. Theatre, we might then remember, is not committed to the hard binary between reality and illusion, but lives in the space or overlap between, having always the potential to offer itself as both a representation of the world and the expression of a vision.

What this leads to is the 'deep grief' which Agave sees awaiting her as her vision readjusts. Thinking back to Macbeth's inability to mourn his wife, as well as to Lear's ferocious resistance to weeping, it matters that the transition out of madness here is marked by a sustained lament. The manuscript is imperfect, but we know that the rest of Pentheus's body is brought on stage, that Agave asks whether the limbs have been fitted together in a way that is decent and proper and even beautiful (*kalōs*), and that she mourns over each body part in turn, no doubt joining the head to the rest. Most of the words are lost, but the effect must have been of a sustained openness to grief, in which what might have been unbearable is nevertheless borne. We are given something like a funeral mourning rite, a scarred and imperfect version of the normal ceremony, but for that reason (being rooted in the experience of disaster) immensely moving and, importantly, *achieved*. The body that had been torn apart is pieced back together, and the destructive mother

gives way to one who mourns. The play's mourning is nominally for Pentheus, but it is more profoundly for Agave, and still more profoundly, I think, for the necessary loss of ecstasy, the necessary transition out of madness. Such mourning arises out of intimate engagement with *both* states of being, madness and sanity, the realm of psychic fantasy and the vulnerability and precarity of life in the world; it bears witness to both, holding connection between them even as it grieves over their incompatibility.

To return now to *King Lear*. In watching the *Bacchae*, we come to see clearly only after we have entered into the energies of Dionysus; Agave's transition out of madness is also ours. In the central acts of *King Lear*, comparably, we enter into Lear's madness. The storm scenes sympathise with Lear, not primarily by presenting him as an object of pathos, but by conforming the play-world—in large part—to his fears and projections. The storm in his mind is answered by a terrible storm out on the heath. He sees in Goneril and Regan monsters of ingratitude and cruelty, and, as if in response, monsters are what they then become. The narcissism by which he generalises his own situation to the condition of all mankind, is endorsed by the presence of the Gloucester sub-plot, unique among Shakespeare's tragedies. As Lear goes mad, so the play for a while goes mad, unhinged from plot or structure, in the extraordinary sequence of scenes that run from the storm to the meeting with blind Gloucester, in which the play-world is given over to a paranoid-schizoid mindscape: the mad King with his Fool, the blind man with the Bedlam beggar, hunted down by the persecuting children, mania and disintegration everywhere.

At the same time, the play-world offers continual points of resistance to this pressure of inner fantasy. If the storm in Lear's mind engulfs the heath and the cosmos, so that we feel it as a dreadful, elemental force—'Man's nature cannot carry / Th' affliction nor the fear'(III.ii.48–49)—we are also allowed to see the storm, some of the time, as a weather event that is outside Lear, bigger than him and indifferent to his sense of grievance, while he 'Strives in his little world of man to outscorn [or out-storm] / The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain' (III.i.10–11). Wind and rain make you wet and cold, the Fool reminds us, and the Fool's dialogue continually seeks to connect Lear's tumultuous feelings with the bare facts of the situation. What happens to Gloucester is *unlike*

what happens to Lear in important respects, and crucially is much less involved with an inner life: it was not Gloucester's needs that set the plot against him in motion, and the damage done to him is bodily rather than of the mind. As he himself wonderingly remarks, he remains sane and sentient throughout everything. It is possible—just—to see the Wicked Children not as 'monsters of the deep' (IV.ii.50), but as responding credibly enough to the social and familial pressures of an overbearing and unstable father, of illegitimacy, and of a political power vacuum. By the end, the energies which cast them as enlarged shadows to be feared and hated have been largely withdrawn, and they dwindle into caricatures of stage-villainy.

The play therefore does two things. By supplying Lear with a world that fits with his rage and fear and need—a world made to his mind—it bears witness to his inner life. In 'going mad' along with Lear, the play makes us *participate* in his experience. If this means distorting the world, or representing it highly selectively, it nevertheless honours Lear's cry against the cruel objectivity of Goneril and Regan: 'O, reason not the need' (II.iv.264). That Lear's children become either monsters of ingratitude or paragons of loving-kindness answers to some part of that need. But at the same time, or at least from moment to moment, the play offers points of resistance that acknowledge the separateness of an external world. And this too is the qualification of the good witness, who must stand outside passion in order to speak of it, to represent it, to afford it its place within the world.

In the *Bacchae*, the counterpointing of these two modes of being is experienced principally as a transition: we pass, like Agave, from ecstasy to sanity. The second state emerges from the first, without cancelling or superseding it, being so deeply marked by its consequences: Agave holds her son's head in her hands. Still, the grieving unlocked by this feels like an arrival, a terminus, a stable place after the turbulent energies of Dionysus: what Agave sees has no element of projection or illusion. *King Lear*, by contrast, tends to oscillation rather than transition, moments of apparent grounding in which the ground proves illusory or shifting or unstable. Poor Tom strikes Lear as 'the thing itself' (III.iv.106), but his nakedness is a disguise, and his arrival only intensifies Lear's mad fantasies. Gloucester composes himself to suicide, making his peace with the reality of his situation, but Dover Cliff is not what it seems,

and Edgar works to frame his falling as a symbolic moment in a contest between devils and gods. He thrusts Gloucester back into superstitious fantasy, casting him as a figure in a romance, in the paradoxical hope of thereby reconciling him to reality. The marked theatricality of this scene, which also attends his performance of Poor Tom, plays its part in telling us that the play has not yet become entirely sober. Our experience of the last three acts of *Lear* mirrors Lear's own experience in the first two: a continual oscillation, between apprehensions of the way the world barely and nakedly is, and a convulsive reaction that mobilises all the powers of fantasy and outrage against such knowledge (knowledge which the play sometimes calls 'patience'), insisting on the counter-claims of the psyche as the more vital realities. For Lear, as we have seen, madness means, above all, *not weeping*. And for the audience too, I think, much of the play is tremendous, gripping, heart-stopping, in a way that makes pathos—grieving—peculiarly elusive or ever-deferred.

The return of Cordelia is the heart of the matter. Her presence brings Lear out of madness, calms the 'great rage' in him; she re-enters the play as the stabilising reality that the world desperately needs. And she weeps, both in report, hearing of her father's sufferings, and on stage with him. Her compassion releases a pathos that is grounded in attention to the way things are. And yet, as we have seen, she also returns like a figure from romance, the infinitely loving daughter of his need, whose presence is restoration and blessing. The emotion of the reunion scene vibrates, I think, between this sense of blessing and a more painful perception that the damage to Lear may go beyond healing, that although he can recognise Cordelia and recognise her love, there are further realities which may be (as yet? forever?) too painful for him to recognise. Cordelia weeps over Lear in this scene, and in her weeping the proportion of joy at his recovery to grief at his still-damaged condition is hard to know; a good deal depends on how the scene is played. Their next scene together exhibits the same extraordinary tension. In Lear's great speech to Cordelia, 'Come, let's away to prison', he revels in the fantasy of their living out their days together in prison, 'we two alone', praying and singing and telling old tales, endlessly re-living her forgiveness of him, sublimely distanced from and untouchable by what goes on, meaninglessly, out in the world (V.iii.8–19). We cannot hear the aching power and beauty of this poetry without believing in

it: this condition of mind is a reality, and a reality infinitely desirable; to feel oneself so well supported by another is to be immune to all harm. But Shakespeare requires us also to notice that the speech is a fantasy, generated in denial of another kind of reality:

> Cordelia: Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
> Lear: No, no, no, no! Come let's away to prison … (V.iii.7–8)

There are things that Lear does not wish to see. And there is no place for Cordelia's acid contempt in Lear's idyll of reciprocity. By the end of his speech Cordelia is, once more, weeping, unconsoled by Lear's vision, doing what Lear still cannot afford to do, grieving over the irreparable reality of damage and loss. Whereas Lear, yet again, takes his stand against weeping:

> Wipe thine eyes;
> The good-years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
> Ere they shall make us weep! (V.iii.23–25)

In the end, with Cordelia's death, it is as if Shakespeare at last puts a decisive end to this tension, this oscillation, with a violence that testifies to the strength of the impulses that must be overcome. In the old play of *Leir*, all ended well, and there are enough generic marks of romance in Shakespeare's play—the loss and restoration of identity, the reunions between parent and child, the movement of exile and return, the ascendancy of the sympathetic characters—for the first audience to expect that this play, too, would answer to their wishes. But shockingly, it is not to be: and now Lear, like Agave, must see what it is that he carries in his arms.

> She's gone for ever.
> I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
> She's dead as earth. (V.iii.260–62)

But he cannot sustain this for long; for Lear at least, the oscillation continues:

> This feather stirs, she lives! If it be so,
> It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
> That ever I have felt. (V.iii.266–68)

which in turn gives way to:

> I might have sav'd her, now she's gone for ever! (V.iii.271)

But then, two lines later, he hears her speak, though only to him:

> What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
> Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. (V.iii.273–74)

After this, his attention slides away for a while to other matters, as simply unable to take in what is before him. As Albany says:

> He knows not what he sees, and vain it is
> That we present to him.[88]

What Agave achieves, Lear can do only intermittently. The sight is too painful; Lear's sanity cannot hold. Yet this turns once more, with a last, brutal insistence on the reality, an attempt at grasping, irrevocably, the irrevocable thing itself:

> Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never. (V.iii.308–09)

And this, in the Quarto, is final, the overwhelming knowledge in which Lear dies. But in the Folio text, Lear's mind turns yet again, rising up against such knowledge, and he dies very differently:

> Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,
> Look there, look there! (V.iii.311–12)

In the Folio text, there is for Lear no achieved transition from madness to sanity, and no ultimate admission of grieving. What he sees at the end, we must suppose, are the signs of life in Cordelia that would redeem all sorrows. For his audience, both on stage and in the theatre, this changes the nature of the pathos, but makes it no less excruciating. We know that Cordelia is dead, and that Lear cannot bear to know this for more than a few seconds at a time: it is, in truth, all but unbearable. And yet Lear demands, urgently, that witness be borne: 'Do you see this?', 'Look

88 The Quarto reading, which gives us something more than the Folio's 'He knows not what he says' (V.iii.294).

there, look there!' In the theatre, this has an extraordinary effect: Lear demands that we look closely at the body of the actor playing dead and asks whether we can see signs of life. Just as earlier, when he held a feather to Cordelia's lips, in Shakespeare's open-air theatre the feather may well have moved, so now, if we look hard enough at Cordelia, we may see a body that is still breathing. We know that she is dead, dead as earth, but the presence of the theatre opens up the boundary between reality and make-believe, life in the world and the life of the mind, in a way that baulks at giving automatic precedence to the former. As Winnicott said, we are poor indeed if we are only sane. There is no consolation in this, certainly no positive delusion, but it allows us to participate in Lear's experience to the very end: what is oscillation in him is co-presence in us, and we witness on our pulses that division in the nature of reality, that tension between mind and world, which without such witness could only appear as madness. This is what it is to speak (or at least to know) what we feel, not what we ought to say, if 'ought' means submission to the world's decree as to what is the case. This is what it is to find our own condition truly spoken about.