

CONSTELLATIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY, MATERNAL FANTASIES AND THE
SYMBOLIC SIGNIFIER IN *KING LEAR*

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ABSTRACT: This essay aims at discussing the constellations of subjectivity and maternal fantasies in *King Lear*. The analysis is focused on the first scene of play, taking into account Lear's blindness in not recognising his own failure and limits. The scene is analyzed according to Cavell's, Adelman's and Lacan's assumptions. Moreover, I propose the notion of symbolic signifier, based on Lacan's concepts. Shakespeare introduces the play's symbolic signifier, conveyed by key-words such as *nothing* and *darker purposes*. In these symbolic signifiers we can see what is hidden in the play, what is suggested and emanates as the core meaning of the characters' subjectivity.

Keywords: Subjectivity. Maternal Fantasies. Symbolic Signifier. Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

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CONSTELAÇÕES DE SUBJETIVIDADE, FANTASIAS MATERNAS E SIGNIFICANTE SIMBÓLICO EM *REI LEAR*

RESUMO: Esse artigo tem por objetivo discutir as constelações de subjetividade e fantasias maternas em *Rei Lear*. A análise centra-se na primeira cena da peça, considerando a cegueira de Lear ao não reconhecer suas falhas e limites. A cena é analisada a partir das concepções de Cavell, Adelman e Lacan. Além disso, proponho o conceito de significante simbólico, com base nas acepções lacanianas. Shakespeare introduz o significante simbólico da peça, expressado pelas palavras-chave *nada* e *propósitos mais obscuros*. Nesses significantes simbólicos podemos ver o que está oculto na peça, o que é sugerido e emana como o significado principal da interioridade das personagens.

Palavras-chave: Subjetividade. Fantasias maternas. Significante simbólico. *Rei Lear* de Shakespeare.

INTRODUCTION

King Lear begins in a dark and tense atmosphere. It is one of the most intriguing plays by Shakespeare, since we cannot immediately identify in which country, place or even time the play takes place. Some say it is a pre-Christian play; others read it as a mediaeval play; it is also said to take place in England, since Lear refers to the mediaeval Britain; but most readers claim it is timeless, because we are not able to place it in any historical moment. There is no consensus as concerns time and place. According to Maguire (2004), Shakespeare sets the play in a pre-Christian Britain to suggest that 'the family in *Lear* withholds love' (2004, p. 200), an argument also proposed by Cavell (2005). Bullough (1975) states it is a mediaeval play, since its imaginaries, motives and places are set in a non-distant past of England.

Lear stages a performance of the division of his kingdom for which he requires his daughters' flattering. He intends to get rid of his royal obligations, but is not prepared to lose his sovereignty. When Cordelia refuses to flatter

him he does not accept her sincerity: he expects her flattering rather than her true 'nothing'. However, I think this sort of staging signifies that King Lear re-stages a particular feeling, experience, and discontent which come out in the first scene when Cordelia's answer is just 'nothing'; Lear's feelings are unleashed by her answer: the feeling of loss, of being rejected, probably the re-imagined primeval individuating moment of the self. Thus, he just projects his anger, anxiety, and despair against his daughters and his subjects due to the feeling of unconsciously re-living the individuating moment. That is why he is acting all the time: the obfuscated feeling of remembering the individuating moment of the self.

Here, it is worth evoking Derek Cohen's observation in his book *Searching Shakespeare* (2003): *King Lear* is a play with no memory. Thus, the events which happened before the opening scene of the drama are very important for the characters' experience in the play. The author suggests that there is a pre-play and that its climax is the decision to divide the kingdom, just right before the very beginning of the play. The past of the play is quite vague and shadowy, but it is suggested in the unsaid, the silences and the linguistic breaks of the text.

LACAN'S SIGNIFIER AND SUBJECTIVITY

The concept of symbolic signifier and the constellation of subjectivity¹ is based on Lacan's "Mirror Stage". In this essay, Lacan starts from the neurological assumption that human beings are born in a foetus form: the newborn cannot coordinate movements, with instinctive or willful intentions, i. e., he cannot walk, nor keep himself in an erect posture. He points out that until the age of six months, the baby seeks expression in a set of spasmodic and joyful reaction in its gestures and movements. Thus, the mirror stage is considered by Lacan as an *identification* process of a particular sort: the mother's presence is perceived as a continuum of the infant's own body, as if the mother were his own self. The only thing it identifies is the blissful union with the breast of the mother. According to Lacan,

The joyful assumption of the specular image to this being still plunged in the moving impotency and in the dependence of being breast-fed which is the nestling of human being in this stage of *infants* shall seem to us to manifest thus, in an exemplar situation, the symbolic matrix in which the Ego plunges

¹ The concept of constellation of subjectivity refers to the set of images, silences and linguistic elements that point to feelings, sensations, memory, which signals subjective traits analyzed in the characters of the play.

itself in a primordial form, before being objectified in the dialectics of identification with the other and before the language gives himself back, in the universal, his function of subject. (LACAN, 1998, p. 97)

This is the functional identification of the alienated image of the self – a ‘self’ which does not make any distinction between himself and the other (mother), not seeing himself – partially – in the other’s image, but literally occupying or cannibalising the other, which can only be configured through the image of the other. This alienated image is a hallucinatory projection – with the whole range of aggressive connotations interwoven into the joyful emotions. This alienation constitutes the foetus’ identity, the fantasy of the body unified with the mother’s. He only declines with his acknowledgment of the father’s presence: her desire turned towards the husband or another member of the family occupying the symbolic position of the father limits the blissful fusion with the child, signalling to the child that her image is a limitation (a symbolic castration) which splits the blissful dual union. The child depends on the mother imaginary, suggesting this symbolic separation, which established the Oedipal triangulation – thus overcoming the false image of the totality of the self: the phagocytising process, through which the foetus-baby wishes to occupy entirely the locus of the imago. This mirror stage is more likely a fortress where the self produces barriers to be isolated. This fortress image could be seen as the *id*, as already pointed out by Freud (2006). However, when the baby first recognises somebody else’s presence, like the father’s, it immediately feels this paternal interference as a ‘primordial hatred’, as Lacan and Freud defined it, causing the baby to be individuated, constituting the moment of individuation.

Lacan introduces the bi-dimensional mirror in our image before the Oedipal stage. It offers the unified image, which is so important due to the child’s lack of notion of bodily integrity, which is different in relation to other mammals. This notion supplements metonymically the bodily totality of not being unified. It is menaced by the other’s presence and its consequent resentment of being menaced is unleashed. Thus, this non-existent subject projects itself into the other. The recognition of the other is shown as negation, the other is negated as if saying ‘he is not me’; by negating that other thing, the baby tries to occupy the place of the other. When the third element is recognised, then something like symbolic identification is projected as rivalry. Thus, the first mirror stage is an idealisation and negation of the other, because the other has to be eliminated, which leads to hatred, madness, and late mimetic hostility. According to Lacan, “this moment when the mirror stage is constituted, it inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the other and by the primordial drama of jealousy [...], the dialectics which since then links the Ego to the socially elaborated situations” (LACAN, 1998, p. 101). The

recognition of the presence of the father leads to the consequent recognition of selfness and the other. As Lacan points out,

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectics which projects decisively in history the individual's formation: the *mirror stage* is a drama whose inner impulse precipitates itself from the insufficiency to an anticipation – and which makes to the subject, chained in this allurements of spatial identification, the fantasies which arise from a lacerate image of the body until a form of totality [...] and for the armour finally taken upon himself of an alienated identity, which will mark in its rigid structure all his mental development. Thus, the split of the circle of the *Innenwelt* to the *Umwelt* generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the inventorying of the *I*. (LACAN, 1998, p. 100)

From the image of this “lacerate body” the foetus can just develop itself being identified with the other, or it can re-stage, over and over again, compulsively this primordial process of phagocytosis in every image it sees which reminds it of the *imago* incrustated in its own self. The symbolic identification creates a set of imagos and signifiers which constitutes the inner self.

As Lacan points out, the formula of the *intersubjective communication*, in which the issuer, as we have said, receives from the receptor its own *message in an inverted form*. (LACAN, 1998, p. 45, highlights added). It is as if when a word is uttered by a character, this word is spread out in all places in the story or the play, constituting then the very signifier which is reproduced in many levels, which we can see in the silences, in the unsaid, and in the non-sequiturs. In *King Lear*, when Gloucester talks about his wife, Edmund's mother, the absent presence of the symbolic figure of a mother hovers over the play, incrustated in the play's imagery. It constitutes the play as if this motif were fundamentally and psychically incrustated both in the atmosphere of the play and in the subjective and inter-subjective dimensions of the character; or else, it is an over-determining element of the play, which will be reproduced in Cordelia's absence in the play.

I coined the concept “symbolic signifier” to refer to a specific literary process based on psychoanalytical principles. In Lacan's assumptions, the signifier would be more closely related to the Real that comes out as a menace to the subject. However, the symbolic means “the order of phenomena which are approached by Psychoanalysis, inasmuch as they are structured as a language” (LAPLANCHE; PONTALIS, 2000, p. 480). Once the literary creation deals with meaning structured as a language, it is possible to intertwine both terms in a rather specific concept – the symbolic signifier. Although Lacan employs some literary examples, the signifier, which is experienced by the

individual as the psychoanalytical phenomena, is not necessarily analysed and is presented rather as raw material related to the real. However, it is structured in the literary creation in a symbolic order of meaning. The literary creation enables the representation of the signifier, structured in the symbolic order of the text, re-presenting the real in the signifier of the processed, analysed and symbolised order of the literary discourse. Whereas in psychoanalysis the real and the signifier are perceived as a raw material which will be analysed and symbolised by the individual in the psychoanalytical treatment, the literary text creates a discourse which structures both the real and the signifier in the symbolic chain. In an extremely simplified analogy, the author processes and analyses the real and the signifier in the symbolic chain in his/her writing, as if s/he were playing the role of a psychoanalyst that re-signifies the subject's (or the character's) experience in his/her unconscious into the symbolic order of the literary discourse. According to Laplanche and Pontalis (2000), the notion of the symbolic by Lacan seems to correspond to two different intentions: "a) Approximate the structure of the unconscious to that of the language and apply it the method which proved its fecundity in linguistics; b) Demonstrate how the human subject is circumscribed in a pre-established order, which is of symbolic order, in Lévi Strauss' meaning" (2000, p. 481). However, Lacan always refused to define the meaning of symbolic. In that sense, Laplanche and Pontalis (2000) propose that they will only notice that Lacan employs the term symbolic in two different and complementary meanings:

- a) To ascribe a *structure* whose discrete elements function as signifier (linguistic model) or, in a more general meaning, the register to which these structures (the symbolic order) belong to;
- b) to denominate the *law* that grounds this order; thus, Lacan, by the expression *symbolic father* or *Nome-du-Père* has in mind an instance which is not reducible to the vicissitudes of the real or imaginary father that proclaims the law. (LAPLANCHE; PONTALIS, 2000, 481, highlights in the original)

Thus, the real and the signifier are stored in the unconscious before the individual starts his/her journey of the psychoanalytical experience. As soon as s/he analyses his/her experience in the discourse, the raw material which is stored in the unconscious will be brought into the symbolic chain. Nevertheless, in the literary text this psychoanalytical symbolisation is naturally circumscribed in the literary discourse, i. e., the real and the signifier are symbolised in the literary text.

LEAR'S SUBJECTIVITY AND MATERNAL FANTASIES

Janet Adelman (1992) analyses maternal fantasies of Shakespearean male characters, whose fantasies are re-imagined as a return to the maternal body. In that sense, Adelman points out that “this transmission from father to son can take place only insofar as both father and son pass through the body of a woman; and this passage radically alters them both. [...] Maternal origin and illegitimacy are synonymous in *Lear*” (1992, p. 107). She claims that the locus of the mother, considered as sinister, contaminates the son, “jeopardizing the presence of the father in him” (1992, p. 107). For Adelman, this re-imagined return is disclosed in terms of aggression and confrontation with the maternal body, because the female body is in general seen as a locus of evil, danger and death for the male child. For her, “the actual conditions of infancy would have intersected with cultural representations of the female body to mark that body as the site of deformation and vulnerability” (1992, p. 5).

The negation of the mother and wife is not only revealed in her absence, but also in the negation of her son. For example, one of the strangest details about Gloucester plot in *King Lear* is that, only after many years, Edmund is presented to Kent, such important nobleman in Lear's court. It is quite improbable that Kent could not know Edmund even when he was a child. Bernard Lott (1997) suggests, in a note in his edition to *King Lear*, that this fact reveals Edmund's evil and trouble-making character. However, I think that Gloucester's intention is to hide his son from the court, keeping secret and occulted his undesired issue, which could potentially disturb his pre-Oedipal relation to his mother, as he says before Lear's entering the scene: “He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again” (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 159). I think that this statement explains Edmund's evil character, but it signs, above all, that the engendering nucleus of his hatred and his trouble-making dispositions, nourished towards his father and brother Edgar, can originally be rooted in his father's negation and shame of him. Nevertheless, Gloucester's ligation to Edmund – as he suggests with the pun *brazed* – reveals, on the one hand, sinister and ambivalent dispositions of his desire of betrayal, which he does not want to see and acknowledge, once they are occulted; on the other hand, it is constantly evoked in the figure of the son and his wife and proudly remembered by Gloucester himself. His son's removal from the mother can sign the desire of exclusivity of her presence and possession. Therefore, his desire of possession and his pride could be constantly stained by the presence of his son. The lack of love is related to the loss of the primeval unity. This new space of subjectivity hides unconscious desires and anxieties, revealed through the gesture of keeping away Gloucester's son from the mother's presence and in the unsaid suggested in the words “brazed” and “conceive” (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 158-159).

The natural fear for lack of love is projected in the wife's figure, whose analogy *round-wombed* rebinds the pre-Oedipal alloy in the maternal figure. Above all, it projects Gloucester's anxieties and fear of loss in the son's presence, which is re-staged in the gesture of removing him from his mother as a reaction to the fear of loss of the maternal presence. Edmund's presence could remind him of something related to his possession and jealousy to the maternal figure. Thus, the absence of both mother and son is imaginarily reiterated in order to create a locus of fused and exclusive unity with the idealised image.

The non-revealed jealousy at this point, suggested when Gloucester imputes Edmund's conception only to his mother, signals one more trait of anxiety regarding the loss of the exclusivity to the *imago*, as the idealised locus and the component of concretisation of totality and pre-Oedipal unity. Edmund's jealousy against his brother suggests to the reader that such a disturbing feeling can happen not only to the son, as well as to the paternal figure, as a pattern of behaviour acquired and repeated in some moment in a person's childhood, as Freud had suggested in *Contributions to the Psychology of Love* (2006). We can see how Shakespeare cunningly signs only in the gestures and in the silences of the play the unconscious psychic structures of the self's subjectivity, veiled to the characters, which nonetheless come out in the language and in the silences. Shakespeare's amazing clairvoyance in perceiving and creating symbolically is striking; four centuries before the emergence of psychoanalysis, he revealed the occulted connections between fantasies of the pre-Oedipal stage of the psyche and the self's subjectivity in metaphors, puns, silences and evasive suggestions. Those unconscious relations between pre-Oedipal fantasies and the presence/absence of the maternal figure – re-imagined in his son and in the *insistence* of this fact – reveal in it a sort of psychic *leitmotiv* which will be echoed throughout the play either in images or the characters' gestures, or else in the silences of the characters' anxieties.

Furthermore, this set of images will be over-determining to the Lear plot. The Gloucester plot is an *over-determining plot* in the Lear plot. In its very beginning, both plots seem to be uncorrelated. Yet as the action moves on we perceive that both of them are very intrinsic. What happens in one plot is mirrored in the other, sometimes in a different way, intermingling the characters' identities. Everything that happens in Gloucester's plot is duplicated in Lear's. For instance, the ambiguous details in the first lines of the play suggest a tense atmosphere and a sort of discontent which hovers in the relations between fathers and children means that there is something wrong in their relations. The dark mood of the play is elucidated in the opening conversation between Kent and Gloucester about the latter's sons. In this sense, Cavell (2005) points out that,

Gloucester has by now become not just a figure 'parallel' to Lear, but Lear's double; he does not merely represent Lear, but is physically identical with him. [...] In this fusion of plots and identities, we have the great image, the double or mirror image, of everyman who has gone to every length to avoid himself, caught at the moment of coming upon himself face to face. (2005, p. 280)

Gloucester's concern with his bastard and true son suggests what Lear does in the same scene with Cordelia: disinheriting her and making her an outcast. Gloucester's blinding will be a symbolic sign of Lear's blindness in relation to his daughter. The constellations in Gloucester's plot are reproduced in Lear's plot, in such a way that the aesthetic effect is too impacting and even too intimate to us.

If Gloucester, on the one hand, ambiguously nourishes shame, shyness and hatred towards Edmund, on the other hand, he unconsciously draws symbolically and fantasmatically his attention to the *fault* of the scission of the primeval stage, the scene of the individuation and his sinister desire for betrayal; such an ambiguous relationship between father/mother x son/wife re-stages *his* ambivalent relation to the maternal body and, consequently, signals the presence of something sinister as an over-determining motive of the play: the presence/absence of the mothers in *King Lear* works as a symbolic signifier which leads and constitutes the characters' subjectivity, which is built up in absence of both maternal presence and lack of love, as Cavell (2005) pointed out. Although Gloucester repels his relation and fatherhood to this son, as he utters "Do you smell the fault?" (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 158), unconsciously he draws his attention and concerns to the primeval fantasies and anxieties projected on the maternal imago implicitly present in the ambiguous relation with both Edmund and his maternal figure.

Therefore, the hidden suggestions in Gloucester's speech – the words *brazed*, *fault*, *smell*, *conceive* – are symbolic signifiers and over-determining motives which hover in the play, contaminating every sphere, i. e., characters, discourses, puns, silences; it leads to something related to the pre-Oedipal stage, re-imagined in these symbolic signifiers, metaphors, and images. Shakespeare very cunningly uses this set of symbolic signifiers suggested in the language of the play in order to create its aesthetic effects, as well as to reveal the concealed subjectivity of the characters. Therefore, if Gloucester's relation with his son and maternal figure suggests his sinister dispositions which pervade the play's imagery, we will also see something similar in Lear's relation with his daughters, which is over-determined by Gloucester's initial mention to his sons.

King Lear is a play which apparently starts in a fairy tale tone. It

represents the same patterns of fairy tales of Cinderella, Psyche and others, as already observed by Freud (2006). It is a common Shakespearean pattern, since he reproduces this fairy tale in symbolic motives in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. However, according to Maguire (2004), *King Lear* is a fairy tale which goes wrong (p. 185). It probably goes wrong because the play represents “two dysfunctional families” on stage: the Gloucesters and the Lears (MAGUIRE, 2004, p. 199). These families are dysfunctional, because bastardy is inside the Gloucesters and disinheritance affects the Lears.

Lear's first speech suggests immediately something striking and important to this analysis. Lear orders Gloucester to take care of France and Burgundy and immediately reveals: “Meantime we shall express our *darker* purpose” (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 160, highlights added). Shakespeare makes a pun here with *darker*, which, in the context of the play, means occult, “our occult intentions, unrevealed, not known yet”, but which also suggests “our most sinister and obscure intention”. Obviously it is not a mere hazard, since Shakespeare uses in *King Lear* and in other plays, for instance in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, many other possible synonyms, such as *secret*, *hide* and *hidden*. The word “darker” appears only in this speech in *King Lear*; in other cases, he uses just in the meaning of dark or related to darkness. Besides that, Lear's purpose of dividing the kingdom in three parts is absolutely inconceivable and illogical to a monarch of Shakespeare's time, mainly for James I, whose policy was exactly the opposite: keeping the three kingdoms of England, Wales, and Scotland together under his own sovereign.

This pun signals something dark, ambiguous, and even insane of Lear's subjectivity, so that by his purpose he might be mad. However, his sinister and obscure intention seems much more than that: Lear's *most sinister* purpose is demand from his daughters their filial love, making them flatter him. The use of the pun *darker purpose* introduces a symbolic signifier into the play, which conveys the dark dimensions that hovers and pervades all spheres of discourses and the characters' subjectivity. In the same way, Gloucester's pun on *conceive* and *fault* is a new symbolic signifier which is rooted in the very inner depths of the selves in the play. There will be many of them, as we shall see, such as Lear's *shadowy forests* and Cordelia's *nothing*.

We do not know which are Lear's motives and Cordelia's intents. By referring to his *darker purposes*, he is suggesting that he wants to avoid recognition. According to Cavell (2005), Lear's motives are the root to tragedy, and he accomplishes that “by the attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation” (2005, p. 286). Lear's relationship with his daughters is pervaded by a concealed and unconscious discontent in avoiding love, which is hinted at by his requirement of endless flattering and non-acceptance of refusal to do so. What is more striking is Lear's lack of

affection, the fear of being abandoned, or not being sufficiently loved and respected, for, even after so many years of an apparently solidified paternal relation to his daughters, Lear still has to test the truthfulness, dimension, and depth of their love for him. According to Cavell,

To pretend publicly to love, where you do not love, is easy; to pretend to love, where you really do love, is not obviously possible. She hits on the first solution to her dilemma: Love, and be silent. That is, love *by* being silent. That will do what he seems to want, it will avoid the expression of love, keep it secret. She is his joy; she knows it and he knows it. Surely that is enough? (2005, p. 290)

He wants publicly to show his dowry of being loved by his daughters. However, as he requires a *show* or a *demonstration* with orchestrated and ornamented speeches, it is not love he requires, it is just the idea of being loved. When he becomes an old man his fear of being abandoned and absence reveals his present anxieties in the self's psyche. Nevertheless, such anxiety signals suggest the persistence of something much more primitive of a pre-Oedipal stage longing for idealised unity and totality, which is aimed until the age of death. Lear then asks his daughters:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 161)

Requiring his daughters' flattering as demonstration of their love hints at his rooted narcissism which obliges their exposition to this sort of humiliation. This attitude already suggests his paranoid mood, which signals his desire for control and possession. What is visible is the projection of both Lear's and Gloucester's egocentric fantasies which nourish the necessity in projecting and re-directing their primeval desires in the constitution of their individuality and consequently their subjectivity. The pre-Oedipal narcissistic fusion, which was re-wounded and re-imagined in Gloucester by his betrayal, and in Lear's case, which will be remembered by Cordelia, signifies the splitting of the self from the imago, who has to nourish this imago in the image of the progeny.

However, according to the king's two bodies' theory, analysed by Kantorowicz (1997), a king could not present publicly subjective and emotive reasoning and expressions. In mediaeval and early modern England, Kings were supposed to be public figures whose feelings and desires were totally subjected to a corporative logic. Consequently, the king or queen was required to embody a political body which represented the kingdom and the people. The

physical body was only a vehicle for the political body, whose longings and feelings could not be exposed publicly. Thus, Lear's attitude of trying to show his feelings publicly and requiring his daughters' flattering was a mad attitude revealing his subjective dimensions.

Bernard Lott (1997) suggests that Lear had already decided to give the larger part of the kingdom to Cordelia, in verse 82: "what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak" (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 163). Lear's gesture of obliging Regan and Goneril to submit themselves to this sort of test, aware that the largest part will be given to Cordelia, reveals the unconscious desire of not losing his two elderly daughters' love and affection. Furthermore, in his deepest desire he would prefer a sort of incestuous relationship, as it has already been suggested by Luis-Martinez (2002) and Quilligan (2005), whose analysis on Lear is not so well developed. According Zenon Luis-Martinez (2002), in the Chapter on *King Lear* and *Gorboduc*, some have already suggested psychoanalytically that Lear invests a sort of incestuous relation on Cordelia, even though Luis-Martinez locates incest in the 'plays' tragic language' (2002, p. 100). In other contexts, it serves for different means rather than love, such as economic, social and political ones:

Incest is not simply constituted as literary motif in English Renaissance drama for its efficacy in the complication or unravelling of sensational plots, or for its metaphorical value as an oblique mode of addressing fashionable social or political issues, but for its close relation to the problem of private subjectivity. (LUIS-MARTINEZ, 2002, p. 24)

Apparently, it could be Lear's case, but I think Lear's love for his daughter is just idealisation of something already doomed and destroyed, which he still insists not to acknowledge. In this sense, according to Cavell (2005), Lear is bribing his daughters' love. Cordelia avoids the attempt, as if through violation. This is his last desire and everything in his life and in the life of the kingdom depends on its success (2005, p. 288). Thus, Lear's reasons, if there be any, are not really to hear from them that they love him, but he wants a public show, demonstrating he is apparently still loved by his daughters. According to Cavell,

We need not to assume that he does not know his two older daughters, and that they are giving him false coin in return for his real bribes, though perhaps like most parents he is willing not to notice it. But more than this: there is reason to assume that the open possibility – or the open fact – that they are *not* offering true love is exactly what he wants. Trouble breaks out only with Cordelia's 'Nothing', and her broken resolution to be silent. (2005, p. 288)

Lear does not wish to acknowledge that he is avoiding love. As he refers to mortality and to 'blind Cupid' in act IV, scene vi, he suggests and feels he is unworthy of love and he does not want to accept love. It might be that his *darker purposes* are just to hear their praises and love expression in exchange of (false/seeming) love.

Let us now analyse Lear's daughter's discourse more closely. The first praising discourse is Goneril's:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 161-162)

Goneril's very flattering praise mirrors Lear's stage of incompleteness. Her discourse full of inflating images symbolises the projection of Lear's necessity of his daughters' love, so that this projection conveys a space which transcends conceivable measures. Goneril expresses her love in a space of fusional wholeness between the self and the world, addressing the unconscious and suppressed primeval idealised stage of the self's completeness. Shakespeare represents Lear's innermost feelings and his inflating pre-Oedipal desires on the images of love in Goneril's speech, images which transcend the possible thinkable limits of space, life, liberty, grace, health, beauty, and honour – "Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare". However, that imagistic inflation idealises Lear's fusional unconscious desired stage with his maternal figure projected in Goneril's speech, and later on in Cordelia.

It is worth noticing how Shakespeare builds subjectivity in this play: what concerns Lear here is symbolised in the speeches of his daughters and in the landscape described in the play. The pre-Oedipal unity is still unconsciously felt in the unlimited space and in the discourse, unable to name or even describe such a love. The cosmos of the play configures much subtler nuances, suggesting, inclusively, the re-doubling of the desire of fusional totality in the play as a whole. *King Lear* is a play whose characters are very flat. However, the constellations of motives evoked by the cosmos of the play create such an illusion of the characters' inward depth as well as tension in the whole plot. And that is unleashed by symbolic motives pronounced in the beginning of the play, in the very speeches of the characters.

Meanwhile, Cordelia speaks for the first time in an aside which deeply contrasts with the inflating imagery of Goneril's discourse: "What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent" (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 162). Cordelia's silence does not reveal coldness, despite her incapability of expressing in any discursive form her deepest and truest love towards the paternal figure. Shakespeare introduces her first aside in order to contrast her sisters' false discourses to her plainness in discourse and her sincerity in the play. It lays bare the absurdity and exaggeration of her sisters' false speeches.

Lear's answer to Goneril's discourse is also full of images such as *riched*, *plenteous*, *wide-skirted meads*, as if they projected his unconscious desire on the landscape, which is contrasted to Cordelia's silence:

Of all these bounds,
Even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
We make the lady: to thine and Albany's issue
Be this perpetual. (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 162)

Lear also refers to Goneril and Albany's issues considering them perpetual. However, we note at this point a hint given by Shakespeare when using '*shadowy forests*', alluding once again to something dark and gloomy which hovers in the depths of Lear's subjectivity and in his relation with Goneril, as well as his other daughters; that is insinuated in this reference to *shadowy*, which becomes a symbolic signifier, a symbolic locus of his most darker dimensions, rephrasing in a certain sense his very *darker* purposes in the beginning of the play. The forest as a locus of nature, suggesting elements in constant profusion and uncontrolled, threatening, suffocating growth creates a mimetic device to suggest imagistically a dark level of his subjectivity. We must remember that it is exactly that image that Adelman takes in her analysis from the character Gloucester in *Henry IV Part 3* as a first moment of the verisimilar representation of a psychic and floating subjectivity in Shakespeare. Gloucester, disturbed, says, "And I, – like one lost in a thorny wood" (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 82) tries desperately hew his "way out with a bloody axe" (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 82), making himself free from the suffocating maternal body (ADELMAN, 1992). Lear mentions *shadowy forests*, from which he does not want to "hew his way out", i. e., he does not want to acknowledge being still stuck to primeval images at all. Even though, in such affirmative gesture of opulence and ostentation in Lear's speech, he unconsciously signs the powerful suffocating anxiety which is re-imagined and projected in the botanical imagery, and which will certainly be re-experienced later on in the heath scene and in the tempest. This imagery represents

symbolically the undesired suffocation in the uterus, whose dangers fantasmatically and imaginably hover and haunt, as if in the darkest density of a forest. It is worth remembering that there is a universe of imagery as far as forest is concerned, which could be immediately accessed in the playgoers' memory, even without any particular or precise description of it, which remains unconscious in Lear's speech. Once again, the unsaid signs the presence of sinister dimensions, which are incrustated in Lear's psyche, suggested in the motive of *shadowy forests*, which is an analogy to something threatening him constantly: his fear of loss, suffocation, and even castration.

Besides that, the contrast between *shadowy forests* and the other beautiful descriptions of the imagery of nature enhance the obscure and dismal suggestions which are insinuated in Lear's speech, but which we can see in the in-betweens of the speech as one of the cores of his fear of individuation. The handing in of this part of *shadowy forests* to Goneril could be seen also as an attempt – though frustrated – to get rid of such anxieties and images of gloomy suffocation, which might threaten him in the obscure and unconscious zones of his subjectivity, imagistically projected into the shadowy forests: he does not want to admit any possibility of symbolic scission and threatening to the pre-Oedipal stage.

While on the one hand, Goneril uses metaphors of infinitude and incompleteness of her love for her paternal figure; on the other hand, Regan uses the imagery of forging and geometry to express her love to Lear:

Sir, I am made of the self-same metal as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short: that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys,
Which the most precious square of sense possesses;
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear highness' love.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 162-163)

At this moment, the presence of deep relations among the psychic dimensions between the characters is crystal clear, which is suggested by Shakespeare in the play. The use of that imagery by Regan matches up with Gloucester's insinuation in his evasive use of *brazed*. *Metal* here hints that both Goneril and Regan – including Lear and Gloucester – share these psychic traits incrustated in their subjectivity, which signal the same incompleteness, fear of scission and castration. As I have already highlighted, Shakespeare introduces these symbolic signifiers in order to weave the complex emotional tissue of the play, and once again *brazed* and *metal* are coincident: they

correspond to some general mimetic patterns of representing subjectivity in the play and are related to coldness and stiffness of their subjectivity. Shakespeare uses the image of *metal* as being constituted not only by the same nature, tissue, bones, but mainly by similar incrustated ambiguous inward dimensions.

In that sense, Bernard Lott observes very well that Regan's language, by declaring her filial love to Lear, is much more "grotesque and exaggerated than Goneril's" (1997, p. 2). The rivalry she reasons to have concerning her sister's love causes an infinite pleasure to her. The use of *square of sense*, as if one could measure feelings, love, friendship, sincerity between a daughter and a father is exaggeratedly artificial and signals a paradox here: if Regan's love is comparable to Goneril's – which is supposed to be infinite and immeasurable – why does Regan employ the expression *square of sense*? The use of geometry imagery suggests a deep contradiction, falsehood, stiffness, and artificiality in Regan's discourse, for if her feelings to her father are immeasurable, it is contradictory and even nonsense to measure them up with a square in order to check its limits and perfection of geometric angles and equations; and by not being compared to her sister's love is also a paradox, since to affirm that she would like to measure them up is quite absurd.

According to Maguire (2004), "Lear takes steps to legislate love" (2004, p. 199) and "Lear's problem throughout the play is that he tries to reckon love" (2004, p. 200). Besides that, I think Shakespeare is hinting at something more delicate here: among thousands of blatant ostentatious flattering discourses of his age, Shakespeare is giving a spark of what is really happening in the play: Lear is measuring and judging his daughters' love, which will be rewarded with a part of land perfectly measured by him, yet contradictorily he had already chosen the largest part to Cordelia before the very beginning of the play. Lott suggests that Lear might have discussed this subject beforehand with his counsellors, such as Gloucester and Kent, as we see when both discuss:

KENT. I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
GLOUCESTER. It did always seem so to us: but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most; for equalities are so weighed, that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 157)

It is important to observe the correlation of discourses, since Gloucester also uses the imagery of weighing as a form of introducing the core problem of play: measuring lands was transposed to measuring love, affection, respect, sincerity, care, honour, and friendship. There is another detail here: Lear has chosen Albany's and Cornwall's part of land – Goneril's and Regan's part as

well. Lear just wants them to flatter him, once we learned that the division of the kingdom has already been discussed beforehand.

It is worth perceiving how gloomy zones reproduce in the discourses between father, daughters, and sons, which suggest that all of them are made of the same *metal* – *Sir, I am made of the self-same metal as my sister* – which means, Lear's and his elderly daughters' subjectivity are represented similarly with intimate connections and relations, which reveal their sinister disposition: *the desire of ostentation* (one of Lear's late loss in the play), the desire of possession, whose changing token is love based on appearances of flattering. On a deeper level, this demonstrates the fear of losing his daughters' love, the anxiety of loss of a perfect and idealised unity, repeatedly imagined as a return to the maternal body, constituting the dimensions of his subjectivity. Therefore, the play presents in its textuality inter-subjective images, which constitute its symbolic signifier. Once again, it is really astonishing Shakespeare's clairvoyance in seeing that paternal and maternal strata will be reproduced in the psychic unconscious elements incrustated in the children's subjectivity as a pattern which can repeat itself in different ways in their psychic constitution.

It is quite obvious that Shakespeare did not build such a detailed scientific analysis of these traits in the configuration of the psychic structure, but he foresaw that something was closely related in the reproduction of behavioural patterns between parents and children, which are revealed now and then in various forms, but which correspond to the very phantasms, anxieties, and sinister desires unconscious in our own subjectivity.

In order to enhance Lear's daughters' grotesque flattering discourses, Shakespeare introduces again a Cordelia's aside: "Then poor Cordelia! / And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's / More richer than my tongue" (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 163). The contrast is more and more evident: *poor Cordelia* opposed to Goneril's and Regan's deceitful ostentation and falsehood. Shakespeare suggests that Cordelia might be disinherited, yet only materially. The use of '*and yet not so*' make the audience aware that Cordelia is not unable to love her father, but that she only complains of her incapability of expressing her love towards her father. However, that is something which will be only possible in the final gesture of reconciliation with the paternal figure, which will be a proof of her deep and true love for Lear. Bernard Lott notes in this speech that *more richer* is a rare use in Shakespeare, signifying here "the double in comparison" to the love of her sisters. Yet such a usage is implicitly connected with *metal*, which suggests that Cordelia's love is greater than that of her sisters', once it is real and sincere.

There is a striking detail in Lear's observation about Regan's discourse: he only gives his daughter the part of land she deserves; however he pronounces short descriptions about the opulence of the land, without

lingering in his commentaries about Regan's speech. Conversely, he draws his attention to Cordelia immediately:

To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
Than that conferr'd on Goneril. [*To Cordelia*] Now, our joy,
Although the last, not least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 163)

Lear draws his attention from Regan to Cordelia to his most precious joy. It is explicit that Lear had already assigned the third more opulent part of his lands to Cordelia, which reveals us something very intriguing: there is something sinister and possibly perverse in his relations to his daughters. He obliges his elderly daughters to flatter him in order to deserve the best part of the kingdom, not through affective bonds, but through flattering, false, and ostentatious merits. It is exactly what he is going to do with Cordelia: the merits in the division of land would not be given due to affective bonds, yet only due to the capability which each daughter displays to nourish his necessity of flattering and supplying his affective want, an insistent and paranoid demonstration of affection and filial liaison which has already been said to be incestuous-like. Nevertheless, such a humiliating attitude comes from his affective lack and fear of loss of his daughters' love. Lear's gesture signs, above all, the imaginary dread of loss of fusion in the primeval stage which was already lacerated in the individuating moment of the self, which comes back to haunt and torment him as a phantasm hovering behind his fear and psychic conflicts.

Another detail in this speech is the reference to *milk of Burgundy*, whose meaning Shakespeare let oscillating through an etymological twist, as Lott highlights: the pasture from where the milk comes – proposing various motives which could be instantly evoked. In the sense pointed out by Lott, the nourishing function of the *pasture of Burgundy* redoubles the inherent meaning of feeding milk. Furthermore, at this point the mentioning intentionally vague to *milk* can evoke the maternal milk, following Adelman's argument (1992), one of the elements which symbolically unify Lear to the maternal body, represented in the body of the daughters who must embody this symbolic function. That is something that Adelman does not mention at all. Such association evokes benumbed dreads, which are just latent and tacit at this moment, such as the dispositions to incest and the unconscious desire

to the re-imagined return to the fusional pre-Oedipal stage. However, all these feelings will be conveyed very soon.

Cordelia's response to Lear's desire of flattering introduces a new symbolic signifier. Cordelia's *nothing* re-stages symbolically the scission, the deep cut, the splitting moment between Lear and the maternal figure, for, even though he recuperates her at the end of the play, he will never have her back alive – which is clear through his desperate “*never, never, never, never!*” (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 390). From the first scene onwards, when Cordelia says *nothing*, Lear will not speak directly to his ex-beloved daughter until the end of the play. Then, Lear's long suffering starts, first in accepting the loss of his sovereignty and later on in acknowledging his blindness and mistaken interpretation of the words of his beloved daughter. At the end of this first scene, Regan states that Lear “hath ever but slenderly known himself” (SHAKESPEARE, 1997a, p. 178). Thus, the audience learns that Lear does not want to acknowledge who he is. Regan and Goneril know more of Lear's dispositions, humours, and feelings than Lear himself does. According to Maguire (2004), in *Studying Shakespeare*, Lear “fails to see that the exaggerated protestations of love for him voiced by his eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, are insincere, and that the tongue-tied love of Cordelia, his youngest, conceals (and so reveals) true emotion” (2004, p. 40-41).

Cordelia's absence, which re-stages a sort of child's *Fort-Da! fantasy*,² the distancing silence and the emptiness of Cordelia's absence will haunt and hover in the atmosphere of the play from now on. It is going to be latent motif which vibrates during the whole play, echoes as a phantasm in the edge of the scene, but in the centre of the agitation, suffering, hopelessness, and despair. Maguire (2004, p. 44-45) also points out a very important detail in the play. Both Lear and Gloucester are sent to Dover. Dover was the first place where Julius Caesar arrived in England: thus it is where history starts, it is the origin of England. Many facts take place in Dover: Lear and Gloucester are sent there; the latter wants to jump down the Dover cliff, unnamed gentlemen meet at Dover, the rescue of Lear starts there too. In a certain sense, she suggests that both Lear and Gloucester are searching for their origins and the play stages the search of subjectivity and identity. Nonetheless, according to Maguire, “origins are unreachable. [...] the play presents a pessimistic vision of man's attempts to master his land and find his history origins” (2004, p. 45).

² Fort/da is presented by Freud in his essay *Beyond the Principle of Pleasure*, first published in 1920. In this essay, Freud analyzes the absence of the maternal figure that a little girl experienced in the game with a reel, after her mother had gone out to work. The girl throws the reel and repeats *fort* and *da*, which means in German there (*fort*) and here (*da*). In this game, Freud assumed that the little girl projected the absence of the mother onto this game, showing her anxiety regarding her fear of losing the maternal presence.

According to Susan Snyder, in her essay *King Lear and the Psychology of Dying* (1982), both Lear and Gloucester do not face death overtly, yet only almost at the end of the play. Snyder analyses metaphors and gestures towards death from the beginning of the play onwards. She proposes that ‘what the two do face from the beginning is the loss of power – which is, after all, what dying is about: increasing helplessness, dependence on others with the accompanying indignities, autonomy waning until the self has no more function’ (1982, p. 454-455). Loss of power and death are intermingled, even though I think this psychology of dying could be seen as the Freudian *Thanatos* or death instinct, which is not noticed or even accepted by us. Once Lear gives up power, he cannot impose his power upon his former subjects, even though he tries to do that throughout the play. To Snyder “he ignores the new realities of power, just as he often fails to hear the Fool’s jibing reminders that a king with no kingdom is nothing” (1982, p. 455). What remains for Lear and Gloucester is nothing more than the illusion of having symbolic forms of power. In the very beginning of the play, Snyder affirms that what is being offered to Lear is nothing more than death:

For all their protested devotion, Goneril and Regan end up offering him only their own ugly version of what Cordelia in her honesty offered at the beginning – that is, "nothing." In this choice-among-three, then, it seems that all three choices are death. The difference is that what was perceived as a hostile force while Lear struggled is a loving presence when the struggle is over. Before acceptance his daughters are assassins. (1982, p. 458)

Snyder evokes here Freud’s essay on the three caskets. I think *Thanatos*, which is revealed in the very first words of the play, is going to pervade throughout. Silence, the negation of love and death are quite well intertwined in the emotional texture of the play. Cordelia’s silence, absence and separation will only be acknowledged by Lear as a suffering journey to accept death.

FINAL REMARKS

To sum up, one might see Lear’s blindness in not recognising his own failure and limits. When he refuses to accept Cordelia’s *nothing* as the only thing she can say, not because she does not love him, but because she cannot heave her heart to her mouth, saying false words as her sisters do, Lear fails in not recognising individuation and avoidance of love: he just wants to annihilate his daughters as objects which must idolise and flatter him. Lear’s

and Gloucester's first words unleash something which will hover over the play as a whole, as the symbolic signifier which defines the subjects and their subjectivity.

That is exactly what I proposed in my analysis. From unique elements unperceived by some critics, as becomes evident when Lear's mentions – "the shadowy forests" and "my darker purpose" – he introduces the symbolic signifier, which will be present throughout the play. The symbolic signifier in *King Lear*, encompassed in the words "our darker purpose" and "shadowy forests", bring up symbolic signs which evoke dark dimensions which lead to something hidden in the self. Cordelia's absence is another case: she disappears and thereby Lear plays out a sort of *Fort-Da* fantasy: Shakespeare hides her in the play in order to create through her absence the symbolic fundamental signifier of the play, the absence of the mother figure, re-imagined in Cordelia. In these symbolic signifiers we can see what is hidden in the play, what is suggestive and emanates as the core meaning of the characters' subjectivity. They sign to all constellations of images in the plays.

When Lear utters "the shadowy forests" he is referring to something unconsciously incrustated in the psychic structure of the self, in his subjectivity. However, this reference is not only characteristic of his own self, but it hovers over the play and haunts, threatens and conceals the edges of individuation. In that sense, what Lacan defines as subjectivity guided this analysis as a syntax engendered in the signifier. That is to say, the absence marks and unleashes the construction of the self through the signifier of that syntax. It is in the absence of the projected idealised image which the subject envisages, through an alluring game, to be its own image. In the instant of the individuation, the splitting moment from the maternal body, the signifier marks the absence and defines the individuation of the subject and, therefore, his own subjectivity. The play presents a constellation of images that convey the fears, anxieties and subjectivity of the characters in the play.

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