

“HER KIND NURSERY”:
SHAKESPEARE’S *KING LEAR* AND *CARITAS ROMANA*

The decree of imprisonment for Lear and Cordelia comes up as a major Shakespearean departure from earlier versions of the Lear story as we know it from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) to the anonymous play *The True History of King Leir* (1594). Shakespeare replaced the happy reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia, and the subsequent alliance of Britain and France in his sources, with the defeat of father and daughter alone at the hands of Edmund, Goneril and Regan. To Cordelia, the prison means an inevitable tragic outcome: “For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;/Myself could else out-frown false Fortune’s frown./Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?” (5.3.5-7). Lear’s refusal to see his elder daughters conveys a rejection of Cordelia’s sense of a disastrous ending. His only desire is to share with Cordelia the confinement which Edmund has pronounced, since he envisions it as the beginning of a new life (5.3.8-19):

No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds i’the’cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;
And take upon’s the mystery of things,
As if we were God’s spies; and we’ll wear out,
In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th’moon.

The emotional effect of the prison motif lies on the construction of an imaginary space where Lear fantasises an impossible love with his daughter in a world of isolation from public affairs. Although Edmund's actual intention is to have them executed as soon as they reach the castle, there is not the least glimpse of such tragic end, nor any end at all, in Lear's mind, whose project to share an idyllic cell with Cordelia appears to him as a never-ending adventure. Seclusion and eternity constitute the main features of this paradoxical design of the prison as a *locus amoenus*.

The Shakespearean motif of father and daughter together in a prison cell finds, if not a source, at least a precedent in the *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri IX*, a collection of historical and pseudo-historical *exempla* by the Roman historian Valerius Maximus (I a.D.). His fifth book includes, under the heading "*De pietate in parentes*," the story of an old man named Mycon who was suckled by his own daughter Pero as he awaited his execution in a prison cell:

Idem praedicatum de pietate Perus existimetur, quae patrem suum Mycona consili fortuna adfectum parique custodiae traditum iam ultimae senectutis uelut infantem pectori suo admotum aluit. Haerent ac stupent hominum oculi, cum huius facti pictam imaginem uident, casusque antiqui condicionem praesentis spectaculi admiratione renouant, in illis mutis membrorum liniamentis uiua ac spirantia corpora intueri credentes. Quod necesse est animo quoque euenire, aliquanto efficaciore pictura litterarum uetera pro recentibus admonito recordari. (5.4)

Equal praise must we give to Pero's piety. Her father Mycon, swayed by a similar lot, had been also imprisoned in his very old age, but she nourished him with her own breast as if he were her own child. Human eyes remain perplexed and dumbstruck when they behold a painted image of such deed, and revive, with astonishment in front of a present spectacle, the scene of an ancient event, believing that they perceive living and breathing bodies in the still contours of those limbs. Hence, a written picture must needs affect even more efficiently, as it exhorts the spirit to recall the old deeds as if they were recent, (My translation)

The author's concern with the emotional effect of the representation of this episode as narrative —*pictura litterarum*— and painting —*pictam imaginem*— is not a gratuitous remark, since his nine books of memorable *exempla* became a favourite reading in the Middle Ages, and especially in the Renaissance, a period when its influence was extended to most European humanist courts. As far as Mycon and Pero are concerned, their story appealed to various Italian and Flemish painters of the Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-classical ages. As James Hall states, the usual scene in these paintings is a prison cell where an aged man is suckled by a young woman, as a jailer peers through a window and a group of armed executioners enter the cell. Whereas in the eighteenth

century this iconographic motif, known as *caritas romana*, occurs in painting as a moral example of filial piety, Baroque painters saw in it an allegory of youth and age, and did not overlook the erotic component of a young, naked female breast nursing an old man (Hall 267)¹.

The least suggestion of a source-to-text connection between the *Factorum* and *King Lear* falls into the realm of conjecture. However, Shakespeare's use of this motif or its recognition by an educated elite within the audience are not at all improbable in the light of Valerius's influence. Like aged Mycon, Lear finds consolation in a young daughter whose filial bond urges her to an ultimate deed of mercy. And in this context, the critical assessment of Cordelia as a personification of Charity in a play traditionally understood as a Christian allegory may find valuable support².

Nevertheless, the astonishment —*admiratio*— which Valerius invokes lies on the excessive image of the suckling scene, and in this sense, questions concerning the absence of Cordelia's breast in Lear's fantastic speech may arise immediately. One must take into account that Lear grounds his repudiation of Cordelia in the first scene on his thwarted expectations "to set [his] rest/On *her kind nursery*" (1.1.122-3, emphasis added). Lear's future by his daughter's side resounds with a longing for maternal cares which the word "nursery" associates with the breast. And it does not come as a surprise that, after a series of obvious parallelisms between the Lear-Cordelia and the Gloucester-Edgar plots, the Earl's legitimate son's revelation of his identity to Albany at the end of the play conclude with the following words (5.3.178-80, emphasis added):

ALBANY

Where have you hid yourself?

How have you known the miseries of your father?

EDGAR

By *nursing* them, my lord.

Edgar's maternal metaphor presents the son as a "nurse" to his father's sorrows. Similarly, Cordelia re-appears at the end of the play just to offer the "kind nursery" of which she deprived her father. In Lear's vision, she

¹ On the author's influence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Martín Acera's introduction to his Spanish translation (35-6). *Caritas romana* as iconographic motif appears in Caravaggio's well-known painting *The Seven Deeds of Charity* (1607). *Wooing Scene Disguised as "Caritas Romana,"* by the 17th century Italian painter Leonello Spada, is a good instance of the sexual potential of this theme.

² It is impossible to give account of the vast literature on Christian interpretations of the play. For a relevant summary of traditional views, see Everett (162-71).

will satisfy his father's yearnings, like Pero, in the seclusion supplied by the prison.

The traditional identification of Cordelia with Charity is reinforced by a comparative analysis of the prison theme in *Lear* and the iconographic motif of *caritas romana*. However, the tension between filial piety and incestuous eroticism which its Baroque rendering conveys cannot be neglected as one confronts the interpretation of the play. In *Lear*'s "darker purpose" of the opening scene (1.1.35), in his repudiation of Cordelia and his ensuing madness, and in the final reconciliation pervades a language of desire which psychoanalytic criticism has not ignored.³ And beyond language itself, the spectacle of an ageing father and a silent, loving daughter whose worlds come closer as they isolate themselves from the world of the play, displaces the idea of universal piety to a more individual conception of love and desire. *King Lear* enacts the Baroque transformation of the pious spectacle of filial love that Valerius envisioned into an ambiguous representation where *caritas* and *cupiditas* conflate in a single image and a single narrative guided by the principle of *discordia concors*. And this duality suggests as well that the Christian and psychoanalytic interpretations of the play, frequently viewed as inimical projects, should be reconciled in the complex exercise of exegesis that the Baroque dramatic practice demands.⁴

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³ A brilliant analysis of *Lear*'s desire and maternal fantasies is Janet Adelman's chapter on *King Lear* (103-29).

⁴ I must express my gratitude to my doctoral advisor, Dr. Manuel J. Gómez Lara, for suggesting to me the possible connections between the prison motif and Baroque iconography as I was writing my Ph. D. thesis.