"Their Mutuall Embracements": Discourses on Male-Female Connection in Early Modern England

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“Their Mutuall Embracements”:
Discourses on Male-Female Connection in Early Modern England

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Introduction

Introducing *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*, editors Kathryn Moncrief and Kathryn McPherson succinctly categorize the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England as “a period heavily dependent upon the assumed inferiority of maternity to paternity, feminine to masculine and female to male” (7). This briefest of summaries, in which men and characteristics of the male gender hold unrelenting sway over their female counterparts, is undoubtedly justifiable, particularly given the era’s patriarchal legal codes. However, if accepted without question, this description of early modern England also has the unfortunate potential to eclipse a wide range of rich and competing discourses. Because distance between the sexes is embedded in the idea of superiority, the many close unions that surely existed between men and women in the era are obscured when audiences strictly consider the hierarchical arrangement outlined above. This thesis, then, seeks not to invalidate the opening portrait but rather to expand and enrich it by analyzing male-female relationships in early modern England through a markedly different lens. To arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of such relationships requires an exploration of the contemporary discourses that complicated the concept of division between the two sexes, that recognized not only the possibility of distance but also of mutuality and connectedness between them. It is, this thesis will argue, the alternating tension and balance between distance and mutuality, rather than an unwavering adherence to either, that operates in and drives discourses of the time period. By examining how a variety of genres grapple with moments of union between the two sexes, particularly physical union and its concurrent or resultant emotional bonds, we can gain greater insight into how walls to connection were both raised and bridged in this era.
To commence the exploration of how men responded to and interacted with women and the female body in a broad spectrum of relationships in early modern England, the genre of medical writing presents itself as a prime inroad to the larger topic. In a world legally placing the two sexes into a gendered hierarchy and thus erecting distance and barriers between them, the medical arena holds the potential for a competing perspective: medical men cannot write of such bodily processes as intercourse, conception, or nursing, nor of the potential diseases or complications arising thereof, without acknowledging and grappling with the meeting and mingling of male and female bodies. Because this thesis is interested in men and women uniting not merely on an abstract level but on a physical one as well, an examination of how male-female connections appear in, are obscured by, or are built into anatomical theories and medical manuals of early modern England creates a vital framework for future analysis. The opening chapter, then, seeks not to privilege medical discourse above any other but rather to fashion a useful lens for the overall project of the thesis. By analyzing both the positive and negative descriptions of the conjunction of male and female bodies at the most basic biological level, we can best reevaluate whether divides between the sexes were truly viewed as “natural” at the time, and, in turn, prepare to address the treatment of such divides in arenas outside medicine.

With the foundation for “mutuall embracements” in early modern England thus properly established, Chapter 2 will transition to an examination of the husband-wife relationship, arguably the most intimate connection shared by a man and woman and the cornerstone for human relationships as a whole. The conflicts arising between union and distance in medical men’s texts are quickly recognizable in other authors’ handling of this particular male-female conjunction. Religious discourse in early modern England
overtly supported conjugal union, stressing that God joins two bodies into one through marriage. However, the ominous threat or fear of one’s wife being unchaste and arriving in the marriage bed with previous carnal experience acts, as we will also observe in the medical genre, as a powerful deterrent to the supposedly blessed and ideal connection between man and woman in matrimony. Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling* brilliantly engages these various medical, religious, and societal discourses in its treatment of the relationship between Alsemero and Beatrice-Joanna. That this thesis includes the depiction of a woman who is “guilty” of sleeping with more than one man is not meant to imply that men in the period were uniformly justified in their anxieties over joining with female bodies: in fact, the final chapter will argue just the opposite. Rather, *The Changeling* merits inclusion because it wrestles with the very tensions under analysis: it renders the husband-wife relationship as, in its ideal state, natural and holy, yet it powerfully clarifies the upsetting deterrents and obstacles to physical and emotional union. In effect, it mirrors precisely the aim of the overall thesis, contesting as it does the notion that distance between the sexes was natural or desirable in early modern England.

Moving to an emphasis on the father-daughter relationship, Chapter 3 continues to question the concept of distance as a positive attribute of male-female interactions with its treatment of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Medical texts remain largely silent on the bond shared between fathers and daughters: aside from the most obvious physical connection that links any parent and child, there is no bodily union of father and daughter upon which to elaborate. Moreover, even the depiction of the obvious physical link can be construed as negative: explaining one view of how females are formed, medical man Helkiah Crooke writes, “if from both the Parents doe issue feminine seede, a Female will
be procreated most weake and womanish...If from the woman proceede a feminine seede and from the man a masculine and yet the feminine overcome, women are begotten bold and moderate” (309). Though an inaccurate biological description given contemporary medical knowledge, this portrait of male and female seeds warring with each other is an unsettling one. If a female child is produced, it is as though the father has either entered the battle with inadequate equipment, offering only feminine seed and thus creating a “weake and womanish” being, or he has lost the battle, his masculine seed “overcome” by the feminine. Within such a model, Lear’s struggles to accept his daughters as his own flesh and to recognize and accept the feminine within himself assume a new poignancy. His journey from a man desperately desiring and seeking distance from his daughters to a man craving union with his youngest both enacts the tension between separation and connection under analysis and demonstrates how such a journey, rather than diminishing masculinity, can craft fuller understandings of manhood and fatherhood.

Ultimately, in light of the male-female relationships discussed thus far, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is a particularly compelling drama to encounter in the final chapter of a thesis studying interactions between the two sexes. In its pages, audiences discover a husband acting diabolically because he irrationally suspects that another man entered his wife’s bed; a father doubting the paternity of his infant daughter; and a son suffering terribly from the loss of his mother. Each of these strands raises and builds upon issues previously considered, offering a unique perspective specifically because of their overlap and interplay within a single work of fiction. In its comprehensive treatment of a wide range of male-female interactions, *The Winter’s Tale* both echoes and elaborates upon *The Changeling* and *King Lear* and certainly upon the genre of medical writing in its
portrait of a visibly pregnant and, later, nursing mother. It is the prime text with which to culminate the larger analysis of how distance and connectedness operate in early modern England, a prime example of how both models of interacting with a woman can simultaneously appear in and affect the same person or series of events. This is a play that, fascinatingly, affirms the beauty of close unions between men and women by criticizing the effects of distance, and, as such, it is an apt drama with which to conclude. *The Winter's Tale* movingly confirms what this thesis argues throughout its development, namely, that connection between the two sexes was figured as natural in early modern England and that distance was figured as destructive rather than an aim to blindly pursue.
Chapter 1

Framing “Mutuall Embracements” through Early Modern English Medical Texts

To commence the analysis of distance or union between the two sexes in early modern England, representations of male and female bodies in the medical field are an especially apt and intriguing springboard. To grasp the arguments in future chapters, it is first necessary to examine portrayals of male and female bodily connection at the most basic level, and, in fact, these two bodies were connected in a quite fundamental manner by a longstanding anatomical theory still circulating in the era. Thomas Laqueur, in a seminal work entitled Making Sex, outlines in detail the “one-sex model” that influenced medical literature until the late eighteenth century: in this model, which dated back to the second century, “the structural, though not spatial, identity of the male and female reproductive organs” was advanced; that is, “women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat – of perfection – had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without” (Laqueur 4). In Helkiah Crooke’s Mikrokosmographia: a description of the body of man, one of the more comprehensive medical texts of early modern England, the intricacies of this model are sketched: citing Galen, the second century philosopher and physician often associated with the one-sex theory, Crooke writes, “the necke of the wombe (saith [Galen]) is in stead of the yard, for they are both of a length and by friction and refraction the seede is called out of like parts, in to the same passage, onely they differ in situation which is outward in men, inward in women” (216). Similarly, in his midwifery manual, Nicholas Culpeper professes to demonstrate how “the stones [testicles] of Women (for they have such kind of toys as well as men) differ from the stones of men” not in their function of producing “seed” but simply in their location and
size (26); how women’s “Spermatick Vessels” differ from men’s in length and branches but not in their function of carrying the seed (27). The man’s outward genitalia, then, are retracted in a woman, so that, as seen above, “the penis becomes the cervix and vagina” (Laqueur 26), and the testicles and their vessels become the ovaries and fallopian tubes. “In fact, Galen argued, ‘you could not find a single male part left over that had not simply changed its position.’ Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes are linked by a common one” (26). Within this model, then, men and women cannot be separated into disparate categories through biology: they share, essentially, a single body.

Compellingly, in a dimension that Laqueur never considers, when authors contest this still prevalent theory in early modern England, their revisions do not seek to craft a sense of biological distance between men and women; rather, they suggest a less hierarchical way of viewing reproductive anatomy. The obvious danger of the one-sex model is that, while it undoubtedly points to a close physical connection between the two sexes, it also inscribes a gendered hierarchy well in keeping with a patriarchal culture: “women, in other words, are inverted, and hence less perfect, men” (Laqueur 26); mistakes of nature, as it were. Crooke finds such a conclusion untenable, given the absolute need for women in the continuation of mankind. He overtly refutes Galen as he emphasizes the differences between men and women: “Those things which Galen urgeth concerning the similitude, or parts of generation differing only in...position, many men do esteeme very absurd,” Crooke attests, citing his own belief that there is “little likenesse...betwixt the necke of the wombe and the yard” or of the testicles in men and what we would now call the ovaries in women and concluding, “therefore we must not thinke that the female is an imperfect male differing onely in the position of the genitals” (271). How can a woman
be considered an “Error or Monster in Nature” if “without a woman [perfect generation] cannot be accomplished” (271)? Without the womb, a uniquely female organ, all the other reproductive parts of both sexes are ultimately useless: “the seeds of the Parents...are never actuated, never exhibite their power and efficacie, unlesse they be sown and as it were buried in the fruitfull Fielde or Garden of Nature, the womb of the woman” (270). In Crooke’s model, then, men and women are complementary rather than ranked, and he has no qualms in addressing precisely the manner in which the “fruitful field” of the woman is sown by the closest of physical contacts between male and female.

The pretense of male distance and, thus, superiority over the female body blurs considerably when Crooke details, “The Generation of man and of the perfect creatures is...noble, as whereto three things are alwaies required; a diversity or distinction of sexes, their mutuall embracements and copulations, and a permixtion of a certain matter yssuing from them both” (258). Crooke does raise the familiar specter of “a diversity or distinction” between male and female; however, he does so not to inscribe a hierarchy but to laud the nobility and efficacy of the distinction in the creation of new life. The two sexes are distinct insofar as each has unique “matter” and a unique role in the formation of a child, but this is a difference that will pull men and women together in a physical embrace rather than demarcate them into opposing camps. Detailing the act of male and female junction further, Crooke writes, “The second thing required to perfect generation, is the mutuall embracements of these two sexes which is called coitus or coition, that is, going together, A principle of Nature whereof nothing but sinne makes us ashamed” (258). Crooke’s repeated emphasis on “embracements” is captivating, requiring as it does two bodies equally receptive and open to each other: there is no sense of rank or
distance in so clear a sign of closeness and mutuality. Moreover, here we find an explicit appraisal of a man and woman’s union as natural, an appraisal that stands beautifully beside the depiction of the female’s womb as the “Garden of Nature.” It is capable of bearing fruit only through the meeting and mingling of male and female bodies: to enact insuperable barriers between the two sexes, in such a context, would be as unnatural as leaving a garden, a potential source of growth and sustenance, untended and unnourished.

If Crooke’s analysis is provocative thus far, the conclusion to which it brings him overtly assaults, from a physical standpoint, the supposed superiority of the male gender:

Both these sexes of male and female do not differ in...essentiall form and perfection; but only in some accidents, to wit, in temper, and in the structure and situation of the parts of Generation. For the female sexe as well as the male is a perfection of mankinde...some have growne to that impudencie, that they have denied a woman to have a soule as man hath. The truth is, that as the soule of a woman is the same divine nature with a mans, so is her body a necessary being, a first and not a second intention of Nature...The difference is by the Ancients in few words elegantly set downe when they define a man, to be a creature begetting in another, a woman...begetting in her selfe. (258)

Not only is there no distance between male and female bodies in Crooke’s estimation, there is no distance between their innermost beings. A man begins his life’s journey in a woman, capable as she is of “begetting in her selfe;” harbors a soul that resembles a woman’s in every respect; and one day embraces a woman in the closest kind of physical contact to commence the above process anew. It seems to cost Crooke little effort and none of his masculinity to spell out these realities; after all, as he emphasizes, they are nothing more or less than part of a natural cycle, nothing to lower or shame either gender. In fact, as Culpeper implicitly suggests, intercourse is ideally a physical connection that expresses an emotional one: while his contention that love is required for the procreation of children is now known to be biologically false, it certainly implies that, far from being
perceived as emasculating, physical and emotional bonds between men and women were seen as necessary and productive in the medical domain, celebrated rather than smothered. “Want of love between man and Wife, is another cause of Barrenness…If their hearts be not united in love, how should their Seed unite to cause Conception” (70), Culpeper queries, and in his question is a portrait of two people intimately connected, their hearts uniting so that their bodies can unite and bring another person into this world.

The relationship that can spring from marriage, then, that of mother and child, is of great interest to these medical authors as well. When we consider that such a relationship will often be male-female, the directives for new mothers are particularly illuminating for this discussion, centered as it is on unearthing moments of connection between the two sexes. In an English translation of Frenchman Jacques Guillemeau’s Child-birth or, The happy delivery of women, a popular argument for women nursing their own children is promulgated. Even if we temporarily set aside the supposed dangers of a wet nurse implanting disease or pernicious qualities of her own person in the child through nursing, a fear that will be much more fully explicated in a future treatment of the mother-child relationship, the mother is still seen as the prime candidate to nourish her infant. Breast-feeding continues and re-enforces the bond that was first formed in the womb: unless she is unable to nurse because of sickness, a mother should do so “because her Milke, which is nothing else but the blood whitened (of which he was made, and wherewith hee had beene nourished the time he staid in his Mothers wombe) will bee always more naturall, and familiar unto him, than that of a stranger” (Section L, Chap. 1). Breast milk being viewed in the era as simply a white manifestation of the mother’s blood, it can now sustain the child outside the womb as faithfully as her red blood did during the nine
months she harbored the infant in her body. The son of whom this author speaks “was made” of his mother, and nursing him furthers the attachment the two already share. It is, additionally, a reciprocal relationship: “in recompence” of his mother’s efforts in carrying and then nursing him, “he endeavors to shew her a thousand delights…he kisseth her, strokes her haire…and as he groweth bigger he findes other sports with her, which causeth that they beare one another such an affection as cannot be expressed; and makes that they can never be parted” (I3r). The tender affection that the mother shows her son in sharing her own “blood” with him is returned to her as he expresses both physical affection, offering a kiss or stroking her hair, and also an emotional attachment that defies any description and ties them together in a bond so tight “that they can never be parted.”

Thus far, we have a host of physical images that emphasize the beauty of connection between male and female bodies: married couples entwine themselves in close physical embraces, and, if children result from that union, the new male-female relationships between parent and child are applauded and encouraged. The above process is figured as an utterly natural one, which well prepares readers for the images of mutuality and connectedness to follow in later chapters. Equally critical to further analysis, however, is the recognition that images of conjunction compete with but certainly do not overshadow or destroy the fears and dangers associated with male-female union. While medical men assert that men and women are naturally drawn to each other, often to pleasurable and fruitful result, they are simultaneously in a prime position to recognize that union can harbor certain perils. What if, for example, the female body with which a man is joining has previously mingled with another man? What if the body offered to a husband or the breast given to the offspring of the parents’ relationship is infected with a life-threatening
disease? The hazards that medical men espy in male-female union, because they once again address on the most basic bodily level concerns operating in the larger society, are just as central to crafting the foundation for future chapters as were images of connection.

These dangers, while multifarious, are connected by a common thread, a fear that the woman with whom one is partnering has previously enjoyed or will soon again enjoy the embraces of another man. While the emotional toll of such a suspicion is captivatingly rendered in the fictional dramas to which this thesis will soon turn, its practical implications first find graphic portrayal in medical men’s texts. Repeatedly in such tracts, men are implicitly reminded of their inability to secure proof of women’s chastity. Daniel Sennert, in his *Practical physick the fourth book in three parts*, explains to his readers that although a woman’s “bleeding” at first intercourse “is an undoubted sign of virginity,” a lack of blood could be the result of a variety of factors – her age or the size of the “Man’s Yard,” to name a few – and thus cannot be used to “censure [her] as unchaste” (98). This inability to gain certain and comforting knowledge that you are the only man to know your wife’s body, which will inform the next chapter of this thesis, continues long after the first act of intercourse. Even when a wife delivers a child looking precisely like her husband, medical texts offer that husband room for gnawing doubts. In early modern England, it was common belief that a woman could transform the infant inside her with her imagination: Crooke, in elucidating this belief, shares the ancient story of “a woman who was suspected for an Adultresse because she brought forth a childe no way like her husband, but cleared her honesty because shee shewed a picture in her chamber like the childe she brought forth” (310). The parallel implication, that a woman could transform the infant inside her to look like her husband if she had
need to cover any transgressions, creates a somewhat maddening bind for men in the era. The same texts urging male-female union cannot allay the anxieties over female sexuality and paternity that could easily encourage men to maintain distance from the opposite sex.

Moreover, infidelity can obviously have more tangible results than a husband’s worries or suspicions. If a wife comes to her husband’s bed having had another partner in the recent past, she could be bringing far more into that bed than the mutual embrace Crooke lauds and the love for her husband that, in Culpeper’s estimation, is sure to result in conception. As Kevin Siena details in his study of sexually transmitted diseases in early modern England, “It is undeniable that early…venereological literature showed an overwhelming tendency to present women as causal agents, to discuss contagion almost solely in terms of male victims, and to present images of…female biology as pathological and dirty” (557). While the images of connection cited in the bulk of this chapter prove that female biology was not by any means interpreted as “pathological and dirty” in every medical text, it is fascinating to see how the same womb once portrayed as a “fruitfull Fielde or Garden of Nature” (Crooke 270) can become much more akin to a festering witch’s cauldron than a nourishing paradise when the terrifying specter of disease looms.

Daniel Sennert, moving from a focus on women to a focus on disease in Practical physick, or, Five distinct treatises of the most predominant diseases of these times, cites a popular view of how the French pox, or what we today call syphilis, could be spread not just by prostitutes but by a country’s mothers and wives: “So one seed only is familiar and wholesome for one womb, and causeth fruitfulness, on the contrary the multitude and variety of seeds, doth so affect the womb, that by its corruption it produceth bad, nay the worst of excrements, and from that sordid substance there is…putrefaction” (40-41).
That is, the “seed” from one pure male body is “wholesome” and “fruitful,” but should the woman sleep with more than one man, even if she and they are all healthy, her womb will mingle the various seeds and generate a disease rather than a child. In a perversion of Crooke’s model, in which “a permixtion of a certain matter yssuing from” husband and wife leads to conception (258), the wife pregnant with another man’s seed will have something much more sinister than a loving body to share with her husband, and, perhaps in an even greater perversion of “natural” relationships, something more than pure white milk to offer to her affectionate, innocent child. It is “with the nourishment and milk [that] the evil is communicated to Infants…which way is the powerfullest of all; for when as the milk they suck is changed into blood…the poyson this way is dispersed into the whole body” (Sennert 43). Whereas Guillemeau assures his readers that a mother nursing her child is a beautiful and desirable event, spawning an emotional bond that endures for a lifetime, Sennert contributes a none too subtle reminder that if the woman offering her breast to an infant has acquired the French pox by residing in more than one man’s arms, the child will be sucking a potentially life-threatening “poyson” into its mouth under the innocuous guise of white milk. If, as Diane Cady notes in her study of how language reflects notions of disease, “the assumedly chaste wife is as likely to be the ‘breeder of the most deadly poison’ as is a prostitute” (175), England’s men are again trapped in a quandary. Told in certain medical passages that uniting with a woman is a perfectly natural and fruitful event and in others that it can potentially lead to the contamination of their household, how are these English husbands and fathers to navigate the female body?

This is a question that can only be answered effectively by engaging with discourses outside the medical domain, discourses that will build upon and reference the framework
established thus far. The genre of medical writing clearly harbors a compelling statement on the tensions between distance and connectedness operating in early modern England: while physical unions and emotional connections between men and women are an altogether necessary and very often celebrated part of human life, societal anxieties and fears, physically embodied by sexually transmitted disease but also circulating as abstract and insidious male suspicions, can impede and even devastate male-female relationships. The remaining three chapters will develop and analyze this conclusion from medical writing and add a further dimension to the analysis by turning to fictional drama. With voices across a variety of genres thrust into dialogue, tensions between the natural desire to merge with the female body and the often equally powerful desire to distance oneself from that body because of societal anxieties or strictures can be most fruitfully explored.
Chapter 2

“An acceptable yoking”: Navigating the Conjugal Relationship in The Changeling

The preceding analysis of medical handbooks sketched the tensions that arise when authors and their society advocate union between men and women and simultaneously highlight the dangers of such connection. Medical authors occupy a unique position in this thesis: by the very nature of authorship, they are distanced from male and female bodies even as they write of bodily connections. Obviously, though, medical men were not the sole members of their sex to consider the female body in early modern England, and our dialogue can be enriched by looking at how the men in physical contact with women handle the issues raised in the first chapter. What of lovers and husbands, the men for whom connection with a woman is most expected, natural, and necessary to the continuation of human relationships in general? How might we chart their navigation through the tension between maintaining bodily integrity by keeping a safe distance from women and responding to their innate pull to those same women? In a society whose unspoken mandates for and rampant anxieties over female sexuality clash with the clear certainty that men’s and women’s bodies will meet and mingle, the conflicted role of the potential or actual husband is the necessary and fascinating one to explore in this chapter.

In its portrayal of the fictional lover and, ultimately, rightfully suspicious husband Alsemero, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s The Changeling perfectly captures that conflicted status. The object first of Alsemero’s devotion and, eventually, of his rage, Beatrice-Joanna offers a terribly vexing conundrum to her lover: in orchestrating the murder of her first fiancé; in sleeping with the murderer, albeit unwillingly, to ensure his silence; and in substituting a maid in her marriage bed so that Alsemero will believe
her a virgin, she is a study in female duplicity along multiple dimensions. Within the context of this thesis, it is Alsemoro’s reaction to such duplicity that demands a detailed analysis. Throughout the play, Alsemoro transforms from an adoring admirer, pining for union with his beloved Beatrice and bemoaning her engagement to another man, to an apprehensive and then vengeful husband, scrambling to wrest back his sense of self and distance when her fidelity is questioned and indicted. In his shift, we can trace a number of issues familiar from the medical domain: the belief that a man and woman’s physical union is, as Crooke claims, a wholly natural act that should not invite shame; the fear, explored by men like Sennert, that women are adept at hiding any bodily indications of surrendered virginity or adultery; and an ongoing struggle to negotiate these two realities.

From the very opening lines of *The Changeling*, the act of joining oneself with a woman in marriage, in body and soul, is deemed not merely a natural enterprise but a sacred one. Standing in “the temple where he first beheld” Beatrice (I.i.1), the woman whom he now wishes to wed, Alsemoro speaks of his intentions in a reverential manner:

ALSEMERO

The place is holy, so is my intent;
I love her beauties to the holy purpose,
And that, methinks, admits comparison
With man’s first creation – the place blest,
And is his right home back, if he achieve it.
The church hath first begun our interview,
And that’s the place must join us into one,
So there’s beginning and perfection too.

(I.i.5-12)

By qualifying his intention to marry Beatrice, to be “joined into one” with her, as “holy,” Alsemoro implicitly suggests that uniting with a woman is an action approved by more than biological drives. In fact, it is sanctioned by powers beyond this world, the power of God that resides in the church. There is, moreover, a sense of transcendence in the union,
as though marriage might somehow restore its partners to Eden, “man’s first creation,” and wipe away the sins and failings that separate men from their nobler home and past. Once two distinct bodies, minds, and hearts have merged into one within the church and its sacred history and background, there is a new “beginning” for the two who have been joined and a “perfection” that springs from the conjugation. In summary, a new and perfected body emerges from the marriage ceremony, endowed with a potential that neither body alone possessed. The notion of maintaining strict distance between men and women, against this backdrop, falters so thoroughly that it begins to appear blasphemous.

Each time that Alsemero encounters Beatrice before her fateful plot against her first fiancé, his words evince even more than a physical connection: he speaks as though their two minds are linked, intertwined in a mysterious yet beautiful and sentimental way. When Beatrice deems even “holy prayers” answered by heaven “not more sweet” than Alsemero’s presence (II.i.9-11), he responds, “We’re so like / In our expressions, lady, that unless I borrow / The same words, I shall never find their equals” (13-15). Along with the obvious reiteration of the holy nature of meetings between men and women, the sense of reciprocity in these lines is striking, with the man feeling he must borrow something from the woman to express and share his own emotions for her. Just as he longs for the distance between his and Beatrice’s bodies to vanish in marriage, Alsemero emphasizes the lack of disparities or barriers in their thoughts and discourse. It is poignant to hear him proclaim, “I must now part, and never meet again / With any joy on earth” (I.i.191-92) when he first learns of Beatrice’s promise to another man. What pains and worries him in the early stages of the play is the threat of distance or separation from the woman he loves. To “part” rather than unite with Beatrice would be to part with joy
itself. In a compelling statement given the threads of analysis at work, *The Changeling*, through Alsemero, initially constructs distance from the woman as unnatural and unholy.

Critical to note, Alsemero’s desires would not have appeared at all novel to the citizens of early modern England. In *A godly form of household government*, a popular conduct manual first published near the beginning of the seventeenth century, Puritan clergymen John Cleaver and Robert Dod detail the nature of marriage and the duties of the partners to each other in terms that nicely parallel Alsemero’s musings on the subject:

Wedlocke or Matrimony is a lawfull knot, and unto God an acceptable yoking and joyning together of one man and one woman…to the end that they may dwell together in friendship and honesty, one helping and comforting the other…bringing up their children in the feare of God: or it is a coupling together of two persons into one flesh, according to the ordinance of God; not to be broken, but so to continue during the life of either of them. (Section G)

The notion of distance between men and women being natural or desirable is dispelled by a series of images in these lines that speak to connectedness, to mutuality. Alsemero’s reflection that “The church hath first begun our interview, / And that’s the place must join us into one, / So there’s beginning and perfection too” (I.i.10-12) is fully supported by two spiritual leaders of the church. Marriage, Cleaver and Dod avow, is a “knot,” a “yoking and joyning together,” a “coupling together of two persons into one flesh.” These authors, contending that God Himself finds marriage so “acceptable” that it is His solemn law it never be dissolved, have no reason to obscure the realities of this most intimate of bonds, and their imagery adds a sense of physical proximity to the emotional closeness implied by “dwelling together in friendship and honesty.” A knot, for example, cannot be disentangled without the most strenuous effort, and tearing away flesh from the one body created by marriage would be to inflict terrible pain. As if to solidify and continue to celebrate these conclusions, the authors reiterate before moving to their next
points that marriage entails “a common participation of body and goods…[for] the Lord saith, that they two shall be one flesh: that is, one body” and that “matrimony…being an indissoluble bond and knot, whereby the husband and wife are fastened together by the ordinance of God, is farre straighter than any other conjunction in the society of mankind” (G1). Husband and wife, sharing not simply “goods” but their very bodies with each other in marriage, enjoy a “conjunction” that is, in Cleaver and Dod’s opinion, unrivalled by any other human affiliation. It is a “fastening” blessed by God’s very hand.

A man’s specific duties toward a woman in this “fastening,” moreover, are expressed in overtly physical terms that once again affirm the natural and holy nature of mutuality in a marriage. A good husband is to “love, cherish, and nourish his wife, even as his owne body, and as Christ loved the Church, and gave himselfe for it, to sanctifie it” (Section G). The patriarchal and popular conflation of the husband with Christ in religious discourse during the era, while it cannot be overlooked, is balanced in this passage by an almost symbiotic image of marriage. If loving and sustaining one’s wife is no different than loving and sustaining one’s own body, to do otherwise would be, even in the most basic biological terms, a markedly unnatural act. If a man were to cease caring for his own body, disease and untimely death would be the consequences of such an abnormal disregard for his own health and prosperity. Cleaver and Dod thus write of a husband’s tender regard for the female body to which he is, as we have already seen, so intimately related with imagery that further naturalizes and applauds their union, a union wholly approved by the Church. That these authors, speaking in the name of religion, privilege connectedness over distance is, ultimately, most apparent in their later and fuller listing of a husband’s duties toward his wife. While they note that he must “governe her
in all duties, that properly concerne the state of marriage, in knowledge, in wisdome, judgment, and justice,” this mandate is placed directly between the assertions that “The Husband, his duty is, first, to love his wife as his owne flesh” and “Thirdly, to dwell with her” (H3). The image of the husband as the governor of his home, while an important one for the time, is never given preeminence in this section of A godly form of household government. A governor is one distant from and superior to the people he governs, yet a husband is one enjoined by God to partner with, “to dwell with,” the very flesh of his wife. Those elements of mutuality are what Cleaver and Dod’s manual repeatedly lauds.

Thus far, a reader clearly might assume from Alsemero’s desires and two clergymen’s confirmation of those desires’ holy nature that connection with women is relatively straightforward in actual practice, devoid of the complexities suggested by the medical discourse of the previous chapter. The Changeling, however, is a play that brilliantly engages competing and complicating discourses on what union with a woman entails in early modern England. Even as Alsemero’s character demonstrates how desirable total union between a man and woman can be, many of the play’s other men voice precisely the doubts and anxieties apt to plague the potential joining of body and soul. Natural and holy as the desire to connect with one’s wife is, equally powerful and compelling is the need to be convinced that the woman with whom you are partnering is perfectly chaste. If a man is unsure of his wife in this regard, proximity to her – physical, intellectual, or spiritual – once again appears unsafe and emasculating rather than promising or inviting:

TOMAZO
Think what a torment ‘tis to marry one
Whose heart is leapt into another’s bosom:
If ever pleasure she receive from thee,
It comes not in thy name, or of thy gift –
She lies but with another in thine arms,
He the half-father unto all thy children
In the conception; if he get 'em not,
She helps to get 'em for him in this passion.

(II.i.130-37)

This advice, offered to Beatrice’s first fiancé by his astute brother, is penetrating in its appraisal of Beatrice’s wandering regard and, also, indicative of the wider concerns of society in early modern England. Constructing a woman’s virginity as her most precious possession is a recurring staple of writing and thought in the era: after all, to legitimate paternity, and the proper passage of a father’s assets and titles that it implies, a culture depends on the purity and honesty of its women, particularly of its young single females and the wives and mothers into which they are expected to transition and transform. To discover that one’s wife is unchaste would be a distressing breach of the above paradigm.

Moreover, Tomazo’s description of unfaithfulness allows readers a window into what is much more than a simple and abstract fear that a woman has flouted the expectations and strictures of her society. If it is holy, natural, and beautiful to join with one’s wife, the scenario that Tomazo paints is wholly unnatural. He elaborates in great physical detail how horrifying it would be for one’s wife even to entertain thoughts of another man: to do so is a transgression akin to inviting that other man into the conjugal bed. Rather than simply uniting with his wife, two bodies and flesh made one, the husband would, in a circuitous manner, be mingling with the body of another man as well. If a woman holds someone else in her head while she holds her husband in her arms, it is, in Tomazo’s estimation, as though her sexual pleasure has two sources and her children, two fathers. Traditional signs of closeness and mutuality between a married couple, harboring the other’s heart in one’s own “bosom” and reclining in each other’s “arms,” can be horribly usurped and sullied by the third party touching the wife’s fantasies. And
if this supposed sin in a woman’s thoughts alone is looked upon with disgust, how much more, then, must the possibility of a woman actually committing adultery, bringing not just fantasies but actual memories of another to her marriage bed, weigh on men’s minds.

This latter possibility is, appropriately, spelled out by the very man who demands that Beatrice sleep with him in exchange for his murder of her fiancé. Noticing her conflict between Alonzo, the man to whom her father promised her, and Alsemero, the man she wishes to marry, this opportunistic servant sees his own chance to enter into the equation:

DEFLORES

I’m sure both
Cannot be served unless she transgress. Happily
Then I’ll put in for one; for if a woman
Fly from one point, from him she makes a husband,
She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic –
One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand –
Proves in time sutler to an army royal.

(II.ii.58-64)

With the bawdy and bestial overtones of “spreads and mounts,” coupled with a seemingly straightforward but incredibly demeaning math problem, DeFlores voices a scenario from which any husband in early modern England would recoil. Yes, men naturally desire the holy union between husband and wife. However, the nagging possibility that the woman coming to share one’s bed and mingle with one’s flesh already has the seed of another man festering inside her, to borrow Sennert’s imagery, is a powerful barrier to partnership. And therein lies the central paradox that a new husband like Alsemero must confront: he can ostensibly only know if Beatrice was truly a virgin in the moment that he becomes one with her and she is a virgin no more. Should he find no blood on the bed’s sheets after the wedding night, he has already surrendered any pretense of safe distance between himself and his bride, already wrapped his body into a dishonest woman’s arms.
Perhaps it is little surprise, then, that the desire to read the female body like a book, to make it transparent and expose any secrets it attempts to disguise, is a pervasive one in the time period. If definitive signs of virginity exist and can be made intelligible to any male interpreter, communal anxieties over half the English population might finally ease: a man like Alseméro might enter his marriage bed with the happy assurance that he will be the first to enjoy his bride’s embraces. Offering a framework for her own exploration of the “legibility” of the virgin body in early modern England, Mara Amster posits the questions that also inform one angle of this chapter’s analysis: since “the very nature of virginity leaves the body marked by absence...how can the woman’s purity and the attendant attributes of familial honor and communal pride be confirmed? How, one might ask, could the virgin’s un-written-upon body be accurately read by those surrounding her?” (217). Inherent in Amster’s queries themselves is a dual explanation of why uncertainty over virginity’s nature and bodily manifestations so preoccupied and challenged a wide range of male writers in the era. First, of course, is the fact that whether or not a family’s daughter was a virgin, or at least unquestionably perceived as such, was a rather reliable litmus test for the heights or depths that her “familial honor” could reach. As Deborah Burks notes, if and when “sixteenth and seventeenth-century English dramatists linked women’s sexual continence and their submission to the authority of their fathers and husbands not only to the well-ordering of family life, but to the preservation of social order” (163), they were doing little more than painting reality onto blank pages: to be sure, fanciful characters and intricate plots dramatize the link between female obedience and societal well-being, but the link does not emerge from a play like *The Changeling*. Amster’s queries, secondly, highlight a fundamental difficulty
facing virginity’s interpreters. Concrete, irrefutable proof of a woman’s virginity might pacify Alsemero’s gender, but how to wring that proof from an “un-written-upon” body?

Indeed, efforts to read female virginity often demonstrate nothing more concrete than the male seeker’s anxiety. Considering medical men, Marie Loughlin contends that these authors’ psychological need to find a physical structure that neatly corresponds to their culturally-ingrained notions of virginity is overwhelming: “the hymen itself seems to be the perfect sign of this particular feminine role (the unmarried but soon-to-be married woman), because it is that membrane which so often creates the virginal body as a liminal structure” (29). It would be quite a comforting irony if the female body contained a sure anatomical sign that it had not performed a certain act. The difficulty is that many medical men, with limited or no access to virginal bodies, remained unconvinced of the hymen’s existence, and thus their writings teeter between an “epistemological uncertainty that surrounds this membrane and [their] culture’s immense investment in asserting the surety of its material existence” (39). As Crooke’s evaluation of the hymen will soon demonstrate, men’s seeming subconscious need for a certain marker, a sign that might help solidify their sex’s bodily integrity when they join with women, conflicts with the female body’s often unreadable complexities dramatically. Though not concerned with medical men specifically, other contemporary scholars echo Loughlin’s focus on male anxiety being far more obvious and readable than female virginity in early modern England. Undeniable tensions exist for writers of multiple genres – medical, courtesy, dramatic, and legal – when they encounter “the ambiguity of a body whose very being is supposed to be pure, whole, and ultimately legible” (Amster 232, emphasis mine), which could explain why “the culture fed its misogynistic anxieties on a steady diet of
sensational tales of unchaste, quite un-Lucrece-like women who deceived their parents, their suitors, and their husbands to indulge their desires” (Burks 163), The Changeling being a prime example. If women’s bodies will not even submit to an unobstructed read, the assurance that they will only submit to one man’s advances, as is so desirable, falters.

In a compelling connection to the previous chapter, the medical arena explicates this larger plight of the new husband on an anatomical level. Crooke’s Mikrokosmographia, for example, describes the elusive hymen in terms that recall the purity expected of its bearer: “in the middle of the trench which is in the great slit...lyeth always hid the orifice of the Maidens bosome of modesty”; “partly fleshy, partly membranous...its Caruncles are foure, and are like the berries of the Mirtle”; and “all [its] particles together make the forme of the cup of a little rose half blowne when the bearded leaves are taken away” (235). Crooke all but blazons the hymen, depicting the flowery beauty of its various parts and heralding its function not as a voluptuous and enticing bosom but rather as a guarded “bosome of modesty.” Moreover, the medical text constructs this uniquely female membrane as a physical stand-in for or symbolic approximation of the male’s perceived agency over women’s virginity. The hymen becomes the watchful and ever-present guard that the male wishes he could always be, written about as though it has an active life and will of its own. After all, this physical barrier is “as it were the entrance, the piller, or locke, or flower of virginity. For being whole it is the onely sure note of unsteyned virginity” (235). A woman’s hymen becomes the strong sentinel or heavy lock that promises to keep virginity, the hidden treasure standing behind it, pure and untainted.

For a moment, it appears as though Crooke has solved the puzzle, found a “sure note.” In fact, he has only reiterated in medical language the fundamental problem facing
Alsemero. The description of the hymen breaking in the first act of sexual intercourse illustrates the husband’s dilemma: “for when the yarde entreth into the necke of the wombe, then the fleshy membranes which are among the caruncles, are torn up even to their rootes, and the Caruncles are so fretted and streatched, that a man would beleev they were never joyned” (Crooke 235). In this extremely graphic portrayal, with phrases like “when the yard entreth into the necke of the wombe,” “fleshy membranes,” and “torn up,” the picture of two bodies commingling is inescapable. The husband’s flesh is quite clearly in contact with the female’s, and her “effusion” of blood (236) testifies both to their meeting and to her prior chastity. How much peace of mind, though, can this type of virginity test offer a husband? Short of having his wife medically examined, he will only know if her hymen was intact when his “yarde entreth” her and does or does not tear it: in that moment, he has already fully committed his body and, likely, at least part of his mind and soul, to the woman he enters. If a bride’s virginity can be proven only in the act that makes her no longer a virgin, a husband would have already sullied his own body and honor once he realizes that his wife had previous sexual experience. The only type of virginity test that might offer comfort is one that could be conducted from afar, one that would not require the administrator to be in bed with the body sparking his anxieties. It is exactly this reality, as well as its pitfalls, that The Changeling dramatically re-enacts.

The play, first, overtly undermines the possibility of ascertaining a woman’s status as either virginal or sexually experienced by focusing on her behavior and her actions. If humility or modesty were sure signals of virginity, Beatrice appears a model woman. She speaks of virginity in terms that would calm most fathers and husbands in early modern England, the supposedly rightful agents of female sexuality: working to delay her
marriage to Alonzo, she pleads, “With speed / I cannot render satisfaction / Unto the dear companion of my soul, / Virginity, whom I thus long have lived with, / And part with it so rude and suddenly. / Can such friends divide never to meet again, / Without a solemn farewell?” (I.i.184-90). Despite or perhaps because of their studied duplicity, these words bestow just the “solemn” weight on virginity that a chaste, submissive maiden careful of her family’s honor should espouse. To deem virginity one’s “friend” and even one’s soul mate is to imply that it has been treasured and guarded with the same diligence and care that are generally extended to the person one loves and has “long lived with,” a statement resonating with Crooke’s description of the hymen as a watchful guard and a companion to women’s chastity. Mortally fearing a division from virginity, similarly, suggests that it and its bearer have never parted in the past. What neither Alonzo nor Beatrice’s father realizes, however, is that this is not the declaration of a chaste, shy virgin; rather, it is a studied and manipulative maneuver in Beatrice’s aim to secure the marriage partner who better suits her own desires, Alsemero. Studying or judging a woman’s actions to determine if she is virtuous allows a far greater degree of distance than a physical review under conjugal sheets but still constitutes a grossly imperfect test.

As though aware of the suspicions a new husband might face and determined to avert any uncertainty, then, Alsemero has a supposedly foolproof plan on reserve, a seemingly sure way to prove virginity before he ever has to enter his marriage bed. This virginity test, whose materials and instructions Beatrice finds in her new husband’s closet after she has slept with DeFlores, consists of giving one’s wife a strange drink that will produce observable physical symptoms in her if she is actually a virgin. The benefits of this type of test, were it actually foolproof, are manifold: rather than mingling his own lips and
body with a woman, the administrator of the test can stand at a distance, clinical and detached, as merely a glass touches her lips and its contents affect her body. He need not risk the integrity of his own body in any way. Alsemestro resorts to this standby method of testing his wife when her interactions with DeFlores, a man whom she professed to loathe, puzzle and unsettle him, and Beatrice is able to pass by imitating the effects she observed in her maid upon giving her the drink. Notably, the moment that Alsemestro believes that his virginity test has succeeded and that his new bride is entirely virtuous, his desire to unite with her becomes as fervent as it ever was. He rhapsodizes, “My Joanna, / Chaste as the breath of heaven, or morning’s womb / That brings the day forth, thus my love encloses thee!” (IV.iii.148-50). Alsemestro is caught up in a moment of near rapture, newly confident that his body will be the first to enclose his wife’s just as his love embraces her after this declaration. He places a virgin woman on par with realms of angels, a beacon of light that births a new dawn for the man in her life. That these descriptions of virginity emanate from and center on a woman who ultimately proves herself “an actress, not a virgin” (Burks 179) is not so much an irony of the play as one of the main points it is working to articulate. Part of a society desperately desiring a clear-cut method of determining virginity, Middleton and Rowley explore a world in which a man wrongly assumes himself to be a proficient translator of his wife’s physical enigmas.

Given Beatrice’s skill in acting a virgin’s demure role despite her forced yielding to DeFlores, Alsemestro’s illiteracy in reading her might have been the fate of many of his contemporary men. After all, his wife is conducting her own version of a play-within-a-play, imitating the words and face of chastity to conceal the experiences of her body. How can Alsemestro have cause to suspect Beatrice of duplicity when, for example, “her
woman came pleading her lady’s fears, / Delivered her for the most timorous virgin / That ever shrunk at man’s name, and so modest, / She charged her weep out her request to me, / That she might come obscurely to my bosom” (IV.ii.117-21)? Appearing properly anxious and afraid of the sexual act, Beatrice is able to “feign” her sexual status “handsomely” (IV.ii.137) in her words and actions, just as skillfully as she is able to replicate the virginity test’s effects on her maid and then substitute that same maid for her in a darkened bed. Alsemoro will have a woman close to his bosom on the wedding night, yes, but only in an “obscured” fashion, and is this not symbolic of husbands’ overall fear of not truly knowing the persons lying next to them? Beatrice obscures herself expertly, stumbling only when Alsemoro sees her in the garden with DeFlores and finally begins his painful recognition that her virtuous act “was a visor” (V.iii.47). Important to note, he does not arrive at the correct reading on his own terms: the infallible test that should have interpreted his wife’s virginity before he entered their bed on the wedding night was as spectacularly fooled as its administrator. The truth was obscured until it was, in one sense, too late for Alsemoro. He does not realize his miscalculations until he has already united with a lady other than his once desirable wife.

Not surprisingly, Alsemoro’s realization that he has been duped, that Beatrice’s gasps and laughter were not a true reflection of her sexual status and that she planned a bed-trick, is one that incites his deepest ire and leaves him scrambling to regain his sense of masculinity and bodily integrity. “I’ll all demolish and seek out truth within you, / If there be any left. Let your sweet tongue / Prevent your heart’s rifling – there I’ll ransack / And tear out my suspicion” (V.iii.37-40), Alsemoro fumes. The verbs “demolish,” “ransack,” and “tear” present dual connotations in this context: they recall the assertion
that “when the yarde entreth into the necke of the wombe, then the fleshy membranes which are among the caruncles, are torn up even to their rootes” (Crooke 235), yet they also suggest robbery or rape, the wresting away of a person’s possession without that person’s expressed consent. Both connotations are appropriate: having been denied the union with Beatrice’s body that would have torn her hymen, Alsemero now desires to tear apart and tear himself away from the woman he once adored. Finding himself robbed of a virtuous bride, an honorable wedding night, and the close union he so ardently anticipated, his passionate diatribe against Beatrice has an implicit threat of reciprocal violence. Tellingly, while pondering his next move, he locks her in his closet, determined to contain her body at last: “it must ask pause / What I must do in this; meantime you shall / Be my prisoner only” (V.iii.86-87). In a quite unembellished sense, Alsemero is jailing Beatrice for a crime committed against him, striving valiantly to reconstruct a safe distance from her body. Beatrice feared after her wedding that “before [Alsemero’s] judgment will my fault appear / Like malefactors’ crimes before tribunals” (IV.i.7-8), and at last it does, the judge Alsemero declaring, “Justice hath so right / The guilty hit, that innocence is quit / By proclamation, and may joy again” (V.iii.185-87).

Acting as judge and moral arbiter here, Alsemero wishes to believe his distance restored.

While *The Changeling* does return power to men’s hands by the play’s conclusion, the restoration comes too late to contradict or overshadow the possibility of virginity as a staged performance. Yes, Alsemero is in the controlling judge’s seat as the action closes, but how much can that seat truly mollify the man who proclaimed, “O cunning devils, / How should blind men know you from fair-faced saints?” (V.iii.109-10). Middleton and Rowley’s play does not offer any more conclusive or comforting an answer to that
question than Helkiah Crooke did. What *The Changeling* does present, however, is a captivating contribution to the analysis of distance versus connectedness between men and women in early modern England. The drama certainly enacts the potential barriers to connection in the conjugal relationship, but it does *not* construct distance as desirable or as the status quo for married couples of the era. In fact, Alsemero makes abundantly clear that the conjugal relationship is, at its core, a blessed and natural union, a conclusion amply affirmed by the religious discourse of Cleaver and Dod. Contrast the clergymen’s portrait of matrimony as “a lawfull knot, and unto God an acceptable yoking and joyning together of one man and one woman” to Alsemero’s desperate desire to rip out of Beatrice whatever truth is left in her and to distance and imprison her at the play’s close, and the latter scenario clearly presents itself as unnatural and destructive. That the men in *The Changeling* are justified in suspecting Beatrice cannot be contested, yet this must not be read as confirmation that distance between men and women was seen as an ideal to pursue in early modern England. Alsemero’s pain and rage are so strong because exactly the *reverse* is true: Beatrice’s betrayal frays the “lawfull knot” and permanently defeats what was clearly perceived as natural and desirable, the holy union of two people.
Chapter 3

“Of this child-changed father”: King Lear and the Journey to Embrace Daughters

With its emphasis on Alsemero and the deeply problematic position of the husband in early modern England, the previous chapter chiefly focused on Beatrice’s incarnations as lover and wife. Beatrice embodies a maddening conundrum for Alsemero, who is drawn to her and her body by all the forces of biology, religion, and personal emotion yet is warned by his own and the larger society’s anxieties and suspicions over the female body to maintain a cautious distance. While enacting this tension is, then, a central project of The Changeling, Alsemero is not the sole character in the play whose very identity and integrity as a man are interwoven with Beatrice’s actions and physical body. Middleton and Rowley clearly recognize that a different male-female relationship employs a similar dynamic, that while Beatrice is Alsemero’s love interest and wife, she is Vermandero’s daughter as well. As this chapter transitions into a study of how fathers and daughters seek to negotiate the strain between closeness and distance explored in the larger thesis, Beatrice’s interactions with Vermandero are compelling in their emphasis on the negative elements. By examining common stereotypes of the father-daughter relationship in early modern England, and the faithful reproduction of these stereotypes in The Changeling, we can better appreciate Shakespeare’s King Lear, a play that powerfully grapples with the contradictions and complications of the bond rather than flattening it into a one-dimensional portrait of patriarchal control, answered either by betrayal or by submission.

What is obviously unique about the father-daughter relationship in the context of proximity to or distance from the female body is that parent and child are inextricably linked in the most fundamental way. The remote position that a medical man or
suspicious fiancé like Alsemero might seek to occupy is inherently contradictory for a father, who shares blood, flesh, name, and, as a result, identity with his daughter. This is a reality made painfully clear when Beatrice’s crimes come to light in the final moments of *The Changeling*. Ironically, her exhortation to her father to dissolve the bond that exists between them only makes the indissolubility of the connection much more evident:

**BEATRICE**

O come not near me, sir, I shall defile you:
I am that of your blood was taken from you
For your better health; look no more upon’t,
But cast it to the ground regardlessly,
Let the common sewer take it from distinction.

(V.iii.149-53)

Beatrice essentially advocates a medical procedure, blood-letting, to sever the ties that exist between her and Vermandero, as though she is a spoiled and cancerous piece of him that can somehow be surgically separated, a piece so negligible that it can be thrown out thoughtlessly and drained away in “the common sewer.” Even on a biological level, the absurdity of such a scheme presents itself: how can the blood and traits shared between a parent and child be selectively removed from either party? Beatrice wishes to somehow cleanse Vermandero of her being from and in him, but his final line, uttered just after his daughter’s death, proves how fruitless the attempt is: “Oh, my name is entered now in that record, / Where till this fatal hour ‘twas never read” (V.iii.180-1). Whether he is referring to a formal record of crime or death or, as the footnote to this edition suggests, to “some imagined roll of dishonour” (124), Vermandero notes with grim finality the unbreakable link between Beatrice’s name and actions and his own name and reputation. Moreover, his last line mourns his reputation’s death more than that of his only daughter.
In “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” Peter Stallybrass offers a compelling examination of the framework from which Vermandero was operating in those final judgments. Stallybrass notes the scholarly stance that “bodily definitions” – definitions created by one’s apparel, cleanliness, and mannerly gestures and bearing – were central to “the mapping out of…class” (125) in early modern England and extends the same argument to gender, positing the female body as one of the most central sites for public discourse and attempted control in the era. The father is a key player in the drama that Stallybrass delineates. With the female body popularly viewed as “grotesque” and thus likely to transgress its established bounds of silence and chastity with chattering mouth, wanton sexual conduct, and frequent strays from home (126), the father becomes a new version of Argus, a magical guard expected to maintain an unending watch over his child. The ideal daughter becomes a disturbingly chained and silenced entity, “her signs” being “the enclosed body, the closed mouth, the locked house” (127). She becomes, Stallybrass contends, another piece of property to add to her father’s assets, another piece over which his dominion should hold sway. In a particularly significant and fascinating image for this chapter’s analysis, the author responds to this construct with a simple yet provocative truth: “But unlike most property, this property can bring dishonor to the landlord even as he possesses it…the concept of ‘free’ property becomes radically unstable when applied to a person” (128). Although Stallybrass himself is most interested in analyzing this construct in the marital relationship of Othello and Desdemona, it is certainly applicable to father-daughter relationships as well. If the established role of the parent in that bond is to act as the overseer and to build literal or metaphoric enclosures around his daughter, any refusal of said “property” to oblige is an indictment on the property’s holder as well.
Thus, when Vermandero beholds his daughter dying – a chaotic picture of open mouth and open wounds in full public view – her body speaks his failure and disgrace as surely as its own. With his daughter married, Vermandero had imagined a crucial fatherly duty to be dispatched: as noted in the previous chapter, the very reason that a daughter’s actual or perceived purity was guarded like precious property in early modern England was that it was a requisite for proper marriage and had a direct correlation to a rise or fall in familial honor and assets. Early in The Changeling, when Vermandero lauds Beatrice’s first fiancé as “a courtier and a gallant, enriched / With many fair and noble ornaments” (I.i.206-7), there is an obvious understanding that the marriage will enrich the new father-in-law as well; and when Vermandero intones, “He shall be bound to me, / As fast as this tie can hold him, I’ll want / My will else” (I.i.211-3), we see how necessary the daughter is to the enriching process, her very body operating as the bridge and “tie” between the two men. And to her father’s face, Beatrice never presents anything but virginal humility in this scheme. With such societal and personal frameworks in play, perhaps it is no surprise that as Vermandero watches the child whose honor is bound up with his expel her dying breaths and watches his tie to other nations through marriage rapidly uncoil, he is reduced to wholly bewildered stuttering: “An host of enemies entered my citadel / Could not amaze like this. Joanna! Beatrice! Joanna!” (V.iii.147-8). Enemies pouring in from the outside would be more predictable and welcome than this grave betrayal from within his own castle and own blood. Vermandero’s haphazard use of the two names to which Beatrice-Joanna responds throughout the play poignantly heightens the image of a perplexed, reeling father: Beatrice strays so far from her designated site in the social and familial fabric that her father cannot identify her. He can only marvel at their shared ruin.
Given the debilitating effects of Beatrice’s sin on Vermandero, then, it is all the more provocative to see how *The Changeling* attempts to resolve the conflict between father and daughter. The answer to Vermandero’s dismay, in Alsemero’s estimate, is definitive detachment from Beatrice. Just after Vermandero notes that his name has been logged in a record of dishonor because it is linked to Beatrice’s name and crime, Alsemero soothes,

> Let it be blotted out, let your heart lose it,  
> And it can never look you in the face,  
> Nor tell a tale behind the back of life  
> To your dishonour; justice hath so right  
> The guilty hit, that innocence is quit  
> By proclamation, and may joy again.  

(V.iii.182-87)

While the “it” of the first line technically refers to Vermandero’s name, which Alsemero wishes erased from any negative register, it clearly refers to Beatrice’s life and person as well. The betrayed husband is advocating for the betrayed father what he wishes were possible for both of them: to slice Beatrice neatly out of their “hearts,” to banish her from in front of their “faces,” to be cleansed of their associations to her body and person and thus have leave to “joy again” in their uncontaminated “innocence.” Alsemero reminds his father-in-law that “you have yet a son’s duty living - / Please you, accept it; let that your sorrow, / As it goes from your eye, go from your heart” (V.iii.215-7) and informs the audience that their approval will garner “father a [new] child - / If [this] appear, all griefs are reconciled” (V.iii.225-6). Such pleas advance the comforting illusion that a daughter’s body and expected devotion can be tidily replaced by a son’s, that Beatrice can be swept out of this emerging male family as easily as a tear is brushed from the eye. The duped husband is adamant in his belief that emotion for a deceased wife or daughter has no value: it is cold detachment and a substitute child that will seal the raw wounds.
While Vermandero never applauds or even responds to this vision of a new, enclosed male order, it would arguably be the most desirable of resolutions for him if it could be achieved, assuaging his pain over that tarnished reputation that he repeatedly emphasizes.

Ultimately, that Vermandero’s bafflement and hurt over losing his reputation seems to overshadow that of losing his child is not as callous as modern eyes might view it when placed into a critical context. In Stallybrass, we have seen, the emphasis is on daughter as property, as grotesque body that is only of value and worth to the father if it can be subdued and contained until marriage, at which point the property ownership passes to another male. Closeness to one’s daughter, either in the form of physical affection or emotional openness, cannot find a place in a relationship framed entirely as a transaction. Stallybrass’s ideological study and conclusions find ample support from other scholars. Many Shakespearean scholars, concerned as they are with a type of relationship that permeates so many of the dramatist’s plays, add their voices and justifications for the perceived lack of bonds between father and child in the Renaissance and early modern England. Lisa Jardine, in a work appropriately entitled *Still Harping on Daughters*, gives a veritable catalogue of the educational, economic, verbal, and sumptuary limitations on women in the time period and advances a popular view of familial bonds in its midst. In a world beset by high infant mortality rates at all class levels; by the absence of noble children in their own households from an early age due to wet nursing practices, patronage, and early marriage; and by inheritance structures that gave children a life in the public eye, Jardine posits little room for affection and love between parent and child (80-81). Diane Dreher, also prefacing her treatment of fathers and daughters in Shakespeare with historical background in *Domination and Defiance*, reminds us that
“according to traditional mores, a woman owed her father, and later her husband, a lifetime of obedience” (20). While acknowledging and arguing that certain strands of the father-as-oppressor model were beginning to be re-worked in Shakespeare’s time and in his plays, Dreher nicely summarizes a popular view of the father as unassailable leader of his own small kingdom (16-17), a view that accords with Stallybrass’s portrait of wife or daughter as personal property. For the daughter, Dreher contends, “love in this context was not a passion, but a duty” (16). Mention of the father’s love is conspicuously absent.

If unchallenged, such conditions would suggest the father-daughter relationship to be a barren arena for analysis in a thesis exploring tensions between distance and mutuality. Thus far, we have an image of the Renaissance father as, at best, a detached parent, and, at worst, a terrifying and dictatorial figure empowered to treat his daughter like a pawn in the marriage game and to expect nothing but full obedience in return. It is difficult to imagine any pre-conditions better designed to breed distance and hostility between the two parties in a relationship. Thankfully, then, there are competing and dissenting voices in the study of fathers and their children in early modern England, and it is telling that one of the most cogent of them appears in an essay titled “King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood.” Recognizing precisely what this chapter does in Shakespeare’s tragedy, that Lear’s relationship with his daughters is a markedly complex one that cannot be collapsed into the stereotypes of fatherhood presented thus far, Bruce Young is poised to question and assail the typical model. Taking aim at a number of critics who have seen Lear solely as the quintessential tyrannical patriarch and Cordelia as the daughter at last silenced and subdued, Shakespeare having reproduced through them a larger discourse of his era, Young provocatively questions critics who overly simplify a complicated reality:
In particular, it is clear that fathers [in the period] were not commonly the stereotypical villains [they are made] out to be...Attitudes in early modern England generally acknowledged (with significant limitations) the importance of paternal authority and filial duty but valued other elements of the parent-child relationship at least as much. One of the most striking features of the Renaissance image of fatherhood - largely ignored or misrepresented in contemporary criticism - is its association with kindness, nurturing, and generous self-giving. (46)

Drawing on the work of many other scholars and his own readings of early modern texts, Young elucidates a strong connection between fatherhood and benevolence and affection, suggesting that the conflation of a harsh despot and a good father is a misleading and inappropriate one that too many of his peers have been unwilling to question closely. In fact, Young argues, while fathers in the time period would have been expected to be authoritative with their children when necessary, they were also repeatedly enjoined to offer love and support to their offspring freely, just as God does for His children (46-47).

Though it is a text that Young himself does not consider, St. Paul’s threelfold cord is an excellent example of precisely the competing image of Renaissance and early modern English fatherhood that his essay crafts. This text, authored by Daniel Touteville, painstakingly delineates the duties that exist in various relationships: of interest to this chapter, of course, is the section on parental duties. Criticizing the fact that St. Paul’s injunction “Provoke not your Children” is directed solely at fathers, Touteville contends,

For when he saith, Fathers provoke not; ‘Tis no other than if hee should have sayd, Forbeare the doing of that, which so ill beseemes the person, and ought to be so farre removed from the practice of a father. ‘Tis a title, which sounds not any thing but mildnesse. The Poet therefore speaking of one, in whom this virtue was exceeding eminent, sayth...He was as milde, and loving, as a father. (K3)

Here is a text that, in 1635, forwards the progressive notion that nurturance of children is not the sole sphere of the mother and that harsh and detached discipline is not the sole sphere of the father. In fact, its author is rather indignant that St. Paul would direct a
caution to fathers that presupposes their authoritarian nature and neglects to account for the loving and mild disposition that is both their duty and a natural result of their connection to their offspring. After all, “the very creatures are instructed by nature to be kinde, and courteous towards their young...And shall we, that are indued with reason bee froward, and perverse to those of our owne loynes?” (K3v). This passage does more than highlight the unbreakable physical bond a father shares with the creation of his “owne loynes.” In referencing nature’s instruction of its male creatures to “be kinde, and courteous towards their young,” it constructs a father’s tender regard for his children as an utterly natural event. Clearly, *St. Paul’s threefold cord* offers a model that stresses connectedness between father and child. The text nicely supports Young’s assertion that fatherhood was not uniformly considered a dictatorial role in early modern England: “though modern readers who expect Renaissance parenting to have been harshly authoritarian may find it unsettling, there is compelling evidence that parental tenderness, kindness, generosity, and nurturing were the dominant elements” of a good father (47-8).

The tension that arises between the more traditional view of harsh fathers dominating their silenced and chaste daughters and the progressive vision of compassionate fathers offering their children the closest approximation to God’s love that they will find in this lifetime is captivating. The former is a distancing mechanism that encourages fathers to view their female children as bartering chips that reflect on their trader, eclipsing the deep and potentially highly emotional connection that the two share in their very blood. The latter, while certainly lending itself to more emotional links between father and child, is a mandate that does not take gender into account and thus is bound to encounter specific complications when applied to daughters. That is, in a world seeming to
encourage distance from and mutuality with women simultaneously, even the father who is told to show affection for and attachment to a daughter will face an exasperating bind.

Against this backdrop of competing viewpoints on the fatherly role and the contradictions inherent in telling a father, especially of daughters, to maintain a cautious distance from female bodies enters *King Lear*. Lear is surely one of Shakespeare’s most complex fathers. He is far more than the aged patriarch forbidding or bemoaning his daughter’s marriage to the man she loves, as does Egeus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Brabantio in *Othello*. With all three of his daughters either married or almost so, it is no longer his duty to guard their sexual purity, as Polonius is so anxious to do in *Hamlet*. Moreover, the father-daughter relationship in *King Lear* is not at all subsidiary to or overshadowed by the main plot, as can easily become the case when two lovers flee a patriarchal mandate; instead, it is the catalyst of plot and character development. *King Lear* is, thus, a play uniquely poised to grapple with both the conflicting ideologies of the father in early modern England and the concerns that arise in this thesis whenever men are closely connected to the female body. Studying Lear and his daughters through such lenses produces a more nuanced reading of this tragedy than many current scholars allow.

In the early stages of *King Lear*, the eponymous character is influenced and, arguably, very much hindered by the model of the severe, aloof patriarch that many critics describe as prevalent in Shakespeare’s day. Lear appears to believe, in the opening scene of the play, that to be a strong and respected man and king and an affectionate and emotionally vulnerable father are mutually incompatible positions, that he can garner all he desires from his children by maintaining the dominant posture. It is key that any exchange taking place between him and his daughters is on his terms: that expressions of love are
publicly demanded by rather than reciprocally and privately shared with Lear represents the authoritarian role he occupies as a father. When Cordelia undermines that throne of authority by refusing to declare all her love to her father, it is as though Lear’s connection to her is instantly snapped: “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” (I.i.113-16). These words, intended to distance Lear from a seemingly ungrateful daughter, are already distanced themselves, sounding more like a king’s legal transaction than the words of the pained and confused father Lear undoubtedly is. In admitting, “I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (I.i.123-4), it is obvious that Lear, in his fashion, adores and desires to be close to his youngest child, yet he will not sacrifice or reconsider his dictatorial rather than emotional call for her love to achieve that goal. In fact, Lear cannot even utter that declaration of love and statement of his desires for his old age to Cordelia directly: it is uttered to Kent before Lear turns back to his daughter and lashes out anew, “So be my grave my peace, as here I give / Her father’s heart from her” (I.i.125-6). The use of the third person is telling here, mirroring in grammatical form the separation, the cleaving of physical and emotional connection between Lear and part of himself, his most beloved daughter, for which this line calls out. While Lear undeniably feels an emotional bond with his daughter, what he feels as a father is overshadowed by the public image of a controlling king he feels he must project.

Moreover, Lear’s expectations of his daughters are colored by his adherence to the owner-property model Stallybrass delineates. We can see this dynamic at play in terms of literal property: although Lear “invests” his “power, / Pre-eminence, and all the large effects / That troop with majesty” (I.i.130-2) to his “beloved sons” (I.i.138), he is unable
to accept the natural consequences of such a move. First, it is notable that he relinquishes his property to his “beloved” sons-in-law, making no such affectionate mention of his daughters. To declare that his holdings are legally his daughters’ with their husbands would be an unpalatable and contradictory admission for a king who operates from the patriarchal assumption that daughters themselves belong to their father. That Lear holds that belief becomes evident as Goneril and Regan’s power over him emerges. When Lear’s query, “Who am I, sir?” (I.iv.78) elicits merely the response “My lady’s father” (I.iv.79) from Oswald, Lear bellows, “‘My lady’s father?’ My lord’s knave! You whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!” (I.iv.80-1). Notably, while Oswald’s method of defining Lear’s person is indeed a barbed one, aimed to reduce the king’s grand notions of himself, it is not false: Lear is Goneril’s parent, and, as he is sojourning under her roof, it is not improper for him to be named in relation to the palace’s female head. To be called only a lady’s father, however, wounds Lear’s sense of himself as an independent man, a noble king, a masculine power who is defined by his relationships to others only when he is the superior entity in the equation. The Fool bluntly points out what Lear refuses to acknowledge, that in handing his kingdom to the next generation, the power structure in his relationship with his daughters has been inverted. In what must be a particularly horrifying and unsavory image for Lear, the Fool notes, “Thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers…thou gav’st them the rod, and put’st down thine own breeches” (I.iv.172-4). In their palaces, Goneril and Regan are now more parents, authority figures, than daughters, with the right to hold sway in their jurisdictions and to advance demands on their father until he is “obedient” (I.iv.235): if he refuses, for example, to dismiss any
of his knights, Goneril has the prerogative to “take the thing she begs” (I.iv.248). It is a fact that destabilizes Lear’s understanding of fatherhood as linked to property ownership.

Even more disturbingly, Lear extends that paradigm of ownership to love itself. This father is demanding a level of love from his daughters that is unnatural, inappropriate. He is pleased only when he hears that the entirety of his daughters’ love is devoted to him, that he is prized, as his eldest daughter claims, “dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty, / Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare, / No less than life” (I.i.56-8) or that, as Regan avows, love of her father is so central to her life as to make her “an enemy to all other joys” (I.i.73). Given that these two older daughters are also wives, and considering the approving discourse on love and closeness between husband and wife in the previous chapter, such effusions should contain an abnormal ring. Amidst a much more balanced description of the love owed by daughter to father, Cordelia openly questions her sisters:

CORDELIA

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov’d me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.

(I.i.95-102)

Cordelia is not unfeeling, simply realistic. She declares her love and respect for Lear, the man to whom her very life is indebted, but reminds him that if the daughter he “begot” ever merges with a husband, her connection to and love for “that lord” will be a central male-female relationship in her life as well. Lear’s inability to respond positively to Cordelia’s caring but logical words suggests that he sees love as valuable only when it is dedicated, just like another commodity or piece of property, to him alone. Within these
parameters, Lear’s admission to Kent that he loves Cordelia and had expected to spend his final years in her “kind nursery” conveys more than a desire to be loved in return, to be cared for in his old age by a young woman intimately related to him. It conveys a skewed wish to be the sole focus of her love and care, more like the baby that her union with a husband should produce than the aging father who once held Cordelia as an infant.

On his terms, Lear surely loves Cordelia and wishes to be close to her; however, what he expects in return constitutes a twisted need to own all of his daughter, even her emotions.

It is precisely this notion of Cordelia’s “all,” and its reflection on the father to whom that “all” would be devoted, that scholars have interpreted in markedly different manners. Janet Adelman in *Suffocating Mothers*, for example, finds the daughter-as-mother theme touched upon in this chapter to be the defining element of the tragedy. Lear, she argues, is caught between the infantile desire that Cordelia’s love for him be all-encompassing, just as a good mother’s would be for her son (118), and the masculine desire to separate himself from all that is feminine within him (109). The play inevitably demands that Cordelia give all of herself, her very life, to satisfy the paradox of Lear desiring fusion with a mother figure while fearing the feminine within his own frame: that is, only through her death can the play banish the female presence that threatens to consume the male identity and also place Cordelia back in the control of her father, erasing the dangerous subjectivity she demonstrated in the play’s opening (128). While Bruce Young also sees Cordelia giving all of herself to her father in their reunion and in her death, he patently disagrees with Adelman over the nature of this giving. It is, for him, not an example of patriarchal destruction of the female but rather an example of a child willing to live “beyond herself” and willing to place others’ needs before her own (55).
As such, Cordelia’s way of living is a lesson to Lear in fatherhood itself, which is also “essentially a call to love, service, humility, and nurturing, not a position of self-serving privilege and power” (57). It is the contention of the following analysis that both Adelman and Young paint too one-sided a portrait: while the former sees Lear as a static patriarch, never growing in his understanding of what true mutuality with his daughters might entail, the latter focuses on ideal parent-child relations irrespective of gender, thus ignoring Lear’s fear of the feminine and his plight as the father of daughters. Only by questioning and expanding upon both scholars can the fullest study of *King Lear* emerge.

While she makes a fundamental misstep in assuming that Lear never undergoes a transformation in his relationship with his daughters, Adelman is not amiss in arguing that he deeply fears finding the feminine in himself. What is most difficult for him to bear is that such connections are not a matter of choice: there is no recourse for Lear to sever or distance himself in moments when his daughters are hurting or embarrassing his pride and masculinity, for at least some links that bind father and daughter reside *in* his very body. In an invective with similar imagery to but a markedly different conclusion than Beatrice’s final cry to her father, Lear confronts this reality in a rather blunt manner. When Regan encourages him to return to Goneril with only half his retinue, he directs a heated diatribe against the elder daughter, but it could very easily apply to Regan as well:

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LEAR  I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.
       I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell:
       We’ll no more meet, no more see one another.
       But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter –
       Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,
       Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a bile,
       A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,
       In my corrupted blood.
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(II.iv.218-25)
While Beatrice appeared to believe that the parts of herself shared by her father could be excised from him, leaving him whole and healthy once again, Lear advances the opposite notion. Goneril comes from him, is of him, and the resulting paradox is that even if he gained physical distance from her, “no more meet[ing], no more see[ing]” her, she would still be present and infuriatingly close in his own physical body. Enumerating their ties, Lear recites, “my child…my flesh, my blood, my daughter,” and there are few more explicit descriptions of connection between a male and female in the thesis thus far. If she is a disease or sore in him, then, Lear recognizes that no restorative operation is possible: to use medical terms, he cannot build immunity to something that his body harbors and accepts as its own. He gave Goneril life, and that ties them together no matter what the other circumstances. In a model valuing distance from and superiority over the female body, this must be a deeply unsettling notion for the old king to confront.

Indeed, one of Lear’s most potent and disturbing “solutions” to the cancer of his thankless daughters is to prevent his bloodline from advancing any further through them. After hearing that half his train would have to be dispensed to continue to sojourn with Goneril, he beseeches Nature, “Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend / To make this creature fruitful. / Into her womb convey sterility, / Dry up in her the organs of increase, / And from her derogate body never spring / A babe to honor her” (I.iv.276-81). This is a twisted inversion of the beneficent father calling down blessings for his child, as well as the most surprising of requests in a time period that valued direct bloodlines for practical inheritance purposes. The extreme nature of Lear’s request to the heavens emphasizes the snare in which he is caught: to distance himself from Goneril, he must either call her a “degenerate bastard” (I.iv.254), a base creature whose begetting did not occur in his own
bed, or call out curses against the future grandchildren that would continue to testify to Lear’s bodily connection with what he despises. Neither response satisfies, particularly since the first indicts his dead wife as unfaithful. As Lear avows when Regan claims she is glad to see him, “If thou shouldst not be glad, / I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb, / Sepulchring an adult’ress” (II.iv.130-2). Divorcing a tomb is a horribly unnatural image, as unnatural as the gods withering up Goneril’s reproductive organs at the behest of her own father. The unnatural and horrid images, ironically, speak to what is natural: mournful respect for a grave that harbors one’s wife, a woman with whom man is urged by biology, emotion, and religion to unite; and a mutual, emotionally open relationship with the children who emerged from that union. Focusing on diseased blood flowing through a father and daughter’s veins and on an honorable grave subjected to a legal separation tool, divorce, can only speak vividly to the estranged position Lear occupies early in the play. While a mixture of Lear’s arrogance and his two older daughters’ inhumanity precludes the type of compassionate and tender relationship that Young argues was a mainstay of early modern England, the situation has the paradoxical benefit of depicting isolation and distance from the female body and mind as disabling and destructive for a husband and father rather than as the most desirable position to assume.

One of Lear’s central difficulties in the earlier stages of the play, then, is that he views proximity to the female, or to the female body and its processes, as disabling. Lear is particularly ashamed when he cannot control his emotions as men should: crying over Goneril’s supposedly harsh demands on his retinue, he curses, “Life and death! / I am asham’d that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus, / That these hot tears, which break from me perforce, / Should make thee worth them” (I.iv.296-9). Lear sees his
daughter’s violence as affecting his core, “shaking” his “manhood,” drawing a woman’s vulnerability and tears out of him despite his best efforts at masculine reason and control. In effect, Goneril makes her father painfully aware that his body houses aspects typically associated with a woman’s body, and he closes his lines to her with the promise that “Thou shalt find / That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think / I have cast off for ever” (I.iv.308-10). It is as though, in crying, Lear believes himself to have somehow shed his masculine skin, assuming that a male body betrays itself by showing stereotypically feminine tendencies. A man should not be prey to the whims of his daughters and his own vulnerable body. This belief equally informs Lear’s impassioned plea against madness, “O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper, I would not be mad!” (I.v.46-7), and panicked recognition of hysteria, a disease associated with the womb, in the line, “O how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down thou climbing sorrow / Thy element’s below” (II.iv.56-8). The climactic moment of this aspect of King Lear, of course, arrives with the onset of a tearful storm in Lear’s person to reflect the brewing storm in the heavens. Teetering on the edge of sanity, he rages against the daughters who have brought him to this impasse with their perceived filial ingratitude and monstrosity: again calling to the gods for succor, he begs, “Touch me with noble anger, / And let not women’s weapons, water-drops, / Stain my man’s cheeks” (II.iv.276-8). Again, feminine teardrops are portrayed as changing a man’s very skin, staining rather than simply visiting it in moments of duress. Convinced that he is diseased by his connection to his daughters and weakened by connection to anything considered feminine in his own body, Lear is unable to reconcile here the goal of being a “whole” man with the reality of being linked to the female body.
A great part of Lear’s growth as a character, then, is his learning that stereotypes of masculinity and modes of patriarchal fatherhood impede rather than further the father-daughter relationship. If one is operating from the despotic conviction that one’s rule is law, a loving parent-child bond is terribly fractured: the parent can never admit a personal failing in the relationship or voice his own emotional needs. Love is seen as another thing to be owned rather than an emotion to be mutually shared. To grasp these points, it is necessary to compare Lear’s behavior in the early stages of the play to his behavior when he reunites with and then loses Cordelia. While Adelman sees a silenced Cordelia in the reunion and death scenes, stripped of her earlier autonomy so as to satisfy Lear’s twisted need for a mother but shunning of all else feminine (128), she makes no reference to the transformation rendered by Lear’s experience with his older daughters and in the storm. And indeed, it is this transformation that is so central to the play, that re-writes Lear’s initial view of fatherhood as a form of ownership. Compare, for example, Lear’s mocking satire of an apology to Goneril to his open and true apology to Cordelia. When Regan suggests that Lear return to his oldest daughter and apologize for railing at her over the fifty knights, he blusters, “Ask her forgiveness? / Do you but mark how this becomes the house! / ’Dear daughter, I confess that I am old…On my knees I beg / That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food’” (II.iv.152-7). In Lear’s view of a perfect “house,” the superior male would never kneel under a woman or enumerate his needs to her, never take on what Lear sees as the subordinate, weak female role. As his ultimate apology to Cordelia proves, though, fatherly emotion and weakness in a man are not the synonymous terms that the king believes them to be. Lear, in a fashion, gives his own answer to “Who am I?” when he beseeches his youngest, “You must bear with me. Pray
you now forget, and forgive; I am old and foolish” (IV.vii.83-4). In acknowledging his failings, he becomes a better father in Young’s model and a much more self-aware man, one finally on the path to understanding that traditionally “feminine” qualities, such as the tears and humility he now openly displays, do not somehow damage his male identity.

Given Lear’s earlier struggles with the presence of the feminine in himself, it is quite notable that what heals him, what brings him out of his madness, is connection to his daughter Cordelia. She acts as a healer whose very touch is soothing and restorative: she can offer succor to her ailing father through a simple but powerful gesture of closeness and affection, a kiss. In a tender moment of both bodily and emotional closeness and vulnerability between father and child, she soothes, “O my dear father, restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in thy reverence made” (IV.vii.25-8). She can “repair” her father, make him a whole person once again, by strengthening rather than obliterating his connection to the female. It is a powerful statement, as it posits a direct correlation between connection to one’s daughter and the father’s life and sanity. Moreover, that the love and compassion between father and daughter are now freely given rather than demanded and expected by one of the parties and that they both feel it appropriate to kneel to the other (IV.vii.57-9) implies true mutuality in this relationship at last (Young 57). This mutuality is all the more striking when we emphasize that it occurs not simply between parent and child but between father and daughter, an emphasis that Young overlooks but that is absolutely fundamental to a play so expressly interested in Lear’s struggles with the feminine. Once Lear learns his terrible mistake in working to distance himself from female traits and in placing the role of the father and the powerful man in conflicting categories, he is
determined that only divine intervention will separate him from his daughter now: “He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven, / And fire us hence like foxes” (V.iii.21-2).

Within this context, it is clear why Lear reacts to Cordelia’s death in a vastly different way than Vermandero does to Beatrice’s. The cold detachment that Alsemero advances as the best option for his father-in-law is not an option for Lear, a man who was just beginning to discover the possibility of sharing mutual love and compassion with his daughter. Notably, audiences again learn that Lear becomes no less of a man when he exhibits love and mourns for Cordelia. The teardrops that he once perceived as signs of weakness in himself, as an unacceptable connection to the feminine, are now the carriers of his sorrow over losing connection to a specific female, his daughter. Albany does not construe Lear’s agonies over his dead child’s body – agonies that begin with the horribly pained and potent cry, “Howl, howl, howl!” (V.iii.257) – as inappropriate. To the contrary, he claims, “For us, we will resign, / During the life of this old majesty, / To him our absolute power” (V.iii.299-301). Lear’s human emotion, expressed for a female with whom he shares his very blood and with whom he had begun to forge a relationship based on mutuality rather than dominance, is not perceived as emasculating or enfeebling by the other men around him. Albany still regards Lear as a “majesty”; Edgar refers to him as “my lord” (V.iii.312) even after his dying breath; and Kent marvels that this man was strong enough to have “endur’d so long” (V.iii.318). Lear remains a king in their eyes: there is no contradiction between displaying masculine power and fatherly emotion.

When Cordelia first reunites with her father, she beseeches, “O you kind gods! / Cure this great breach in his abused nature, / Th’ untun’d and jarring senses…Of this child-changed father!” (IV.vii.13-15). While “child-changed” in this context is a negative
descriptor of Lear, representative of the attack that Goneril and Regan have waged on his person, the conclusion of *King Lear* is that it can be a remarkably positive term as well.

It would be anomalous, for example, to imagine the king we see at the opening of the play uttering to any of his children the line, “When thou dost ask my blessing, I’ll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness” (V.iii.10-11), yet it is his entreaty to Cordelia by play’s end. A father can be child-changed, then, when his relationship with his daughter forges a more complete understanding of what it means to be a parent and to be a man, and, most importantly, of what it means to occupy both of these positions simultaneously.
Chapter 4

“Barr’d, like one infectious”: Severed Male-Female Bonds in The Winter’s Tale

In spite of his many railings against Goneril and Regan and his overwhelming rage and sorrow at their supposedly ungrateful behavior, King Lear appears constantly, albeit often painfully, aware of their origin in the world. Lear never passionately contends that his daughters might actually belong to another father, never comes near to carrying out his threat to “divorce me from thy mother’s tomb, / Sepulchring an adul’tress” (II.iv.130-2). Even in the moment in which his deepest ire is aimed at Goneril, this king and father is moved to acknowledge rather than sever his connection to his eldest child: “But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter - / Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine” (II.iv.221-3). Whatever other aspersions might be cast on Lear’s relationship to women by scholars, this aged father does not impugn his late wife’s fidelity, does not question or assault the mother of his children in any manner. If a later play of Shakespeare’s is indicative of the consequences of such an assault, it can be confidently argued that Lear was only allowed a reunion with Cordelia because he never violated one of the most sacred connections that exists, that of a mother and her children.

In The Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare explores in detail the ramifications of a husband and father, Leontes, traveling a path that Lear never did. Of course, Leontes’ charges of infidelity against Hermione are dramatically heightened by the reality that she is not only still alive but also visibly pregnant when the charges are levied, and that her offspring are not capable adult women like Goneril and Regan but young children deeply affected by the repercussions of their father’s blind project against their mother. Leontes’ groundless accusation and trial of Hermione is inextricably intertwined with violation of the mother-
child bond, a violation for which Leontes is never fully forgiven in the course of this drama. The fleeting yet beautiful reunion that Lear enjoyed with Cordelia, one that reaffirmed their close bond as father and daughter, is conspicuously absent in *The Winter’s Tale*. In a play that so implicitly punishes a husband and father for his efforts to distance and separate his children from their mother, maternity is placed at the fore in a manner and to a degree that we have yet to encounter in this thesis. The close relationship and mutuality that a mother can share with her child, a relationship that will obviously often be male-female, is what animates the plot, characters, and final messages of this romance.

This foregrounding of maternity in *The Winter’s Tale*, it must be noted, is complicated and even contested by certain scholars. In a seminal piece aptly entitled, “Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?,” Mary Beth Rose seeks to account for the paucity of mothers in the prolific works of the author. She rejects her peers’ contention that the absence can be explained by the era’s legal definition of the wife as subservient to and thus wholly embodied by her husband, the father of her children; in fact, Rose argues, a “range of cultural possibilities for the construction of motherhood [were] present in and distinctive to Elizabethan and Jacobean England” (295), and Shakespeare made a conscious choice only to develop and explore the most conservative of those possibilities. Rose argues that in a world that was slowly beginning to “raise challenges to established hierarchies of gender and power in courtship and marriage” through Protestant sexual discourse and treatises on the family, Shakespeare had a prime opportunity to engage “the potential ideological inconsistencies” sure to result from a patriarchal society exploring the status of the mother as a female authority (298). By portraying mothers either as “completely eliminat[ed]…from the representation of the desired society” or, when they do
infrequently appear, as women who must “forfeit” their own “desire” so as to remain unthreatening, Shakespeare neglected that opportunity, opting instead to cling to the “anachronistic discourse[s]” sure to fuel such one-dimensional portraits of mothers (304).

While Rose advances a largely cogent argument for the scarcity of mothers in the Shakespearean canon, her passing treatment of *The Winter’s Tale* leaves many elements insufficiently explained or unconsidered, a somewhat glaring oversight given her own admission that Hermione is “the mother figure most fully and pointedly represented as traditionally maternal in Shakespeare’s canon” (306). In her effort to paint Shakespeare as unrelentingly conservative in his treatment of maternity, Rose overlooks the complex manner in which one of the author’s late romances disrupts rather than affirms the trend she is working to trace. She highlights Hermione’s removal from the action of the play’s latter half and particularly her aged body, “her wrinkles which signify that she is beyond the age of fertility,” in her return in the final scene (307). Hermione, in this reading, becomes merely another stereotypical representation, absent for much of the play and docile and sublimated by the conclusion. Rose is not the only scholar to emphasize such points. Donna Woodford, in her chapter for *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*, reads *The Winter’s Tale* as a play that, “while implicitly acknowledging the importance of reproduction and nurture, demonstrates great anxiety over these exclusively female realms of power and represents an attempt by men to circumscribe them” (187). In Woodford’s estimate, this attempt is a successful one, evidenced most notably by Leontes’ removal of his children from their mother’s breast and by Paulina’s inability to deliver anything but Hermione’s aged and infertile body in the final scene, clear statements on the victorious removal of “maternal agency” (194) from the play.
She goes so far as to assert that “the play actually insists on fatherhood, and offers only a minimal accommodation of mothers” (193). To develop a convincing counter-argument to Rose and Woodford’s readings of *The Winter’s Tale* and particularly of the concluding scene requires that we analyze the male-female relationships in the play from a different perspective than either scholar utilizes. By first examining Leontes and Hermione’s relationship and then examining the children created by their union through the particular lens of this thesis, a richer and more complex understanding of this romance will emerge.

*The Winter’s Tale* undoubtedly contains its own embodiment of the tensions between distance and mutuality in early modern England. In Leontes, we see a natural and obvious desire to be close to his wife clash with the fear that he is not the sole inhabitant of her bed; moreover, we see these two conflicting positions advanced within mere moments of each other. In lauding Hermione for convincing Polixenes to sojourn longer in Sicilia, Leontes notes only one other time in which she spoke “to better purpose” (I.ii.87): “Three crabbed months had sour’d themselves to death, / Ere I could make thee open thy white hand, / And clap thyself my love; then didst thou utter, / ‘I am yours for ever’” (I.ii.102-5). That Leontes views this union as natural and beautiful is amply clear given the imagery he utilizes to describe the time before it occurred. Before he was assured of Hermione’s love, of arguably the closest relationship with her that can exist between man and woman, the months were “crabbed” and spoiled, “sour’d…to death” by the separation that still stood between him and his future wife. This picture of something spoiled is a distinctly unpleasant and unnatural one: what was once pure or whole has been tainted. Hermione dispels that picture with her “yes” to Leontes, apparently restoring a more harmonious existence to him. Also, Leontes’ phrase ‘ere I could make
thee open thy white hand” undeniably contains a sexual undertone, an idea of the husband and wife opening themselves to each other not just in word but in body. Once Hermione opened that hand, the “crabbed months” ended, and audiences can assume a joyous spring arrived. In this passage, distance is unnatural and unhealthy, not mutuality.

However, much as Alsemero’s depiction of the natural and holy union between man and woman was contested by other voices in The Changeling – particularly by Tomazo, who detailed the horror of making love to one’s wife while she entertains thoughts of another man – Leontes’ fond remembrance of the moment in which he and Hermione became one is swiftly sullied by fears of her infidelity, fears that are no less powerful in The Winter’s Tale for being utterly unfounded. In describing the state of affairs between the bulk of husbands and wives, Leontes is as fixated as Tomazo was on the “other” man:

LEONTES There have been
(Or I am much deceiv’d) cuckolds ere now,
And many a man there is (even at this present,
Now, while I speak this) holds his wife by th’ arm,
That little thinks she has been sluic’d in ’s absence,
And his pond fish’d by his next neighbor – by
Sir Smile, his neighbor.

(I.ii.190-6)

In these lines, a phantom image of Hermione’s other love interest, not to mention those of the countless other women cuckolding their husbands, haunts Leontes. He pities the man who “holds his wife by th’ arm,” the same arm whose “white hand” opened to her husband in marriage, and is blind all the while to the intruder who has worked himself between that close embrace. The thought is so horribly unsettling that Leontes instantly works to distance himself from Hermione, the woman on his arm, with a crude metaphor for adultery. An unfaithful woman is nothing more than an unstable body of water, one
that can be “sluiced,” “fished,” easily opened and enjoyed by another man. There is a distinct difference between the sexual but lovely image of Hermione opening her hand, and thus herself, to Leontes, making life flower for him once again, and this image of Hermione as a pond open to any man who can operate a sluice and a fishing rod. With an imaginary man standing between him and his wife, Leontes’ only safe recourse is to distance himself: he accomplishes this in language by treating Hermione as subhuman and in actual physical space by confining her to prison. Though his initial description of their union deemed it the most natural of connections, his sudden doubts over her faithfulness provoke an intense desire for separation. The thought of his wife with another man is quite enough to clutter “the purity and whiteness of [his] sheets” with “goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps” (I.i.327-9), and it is a clutter he aims to eradicate.

While that same move from proximity to distance appears in *The Changeling*, it is complicated in *The Winter’s Tale* by the simple reality that Hermione, unlike Beatrice, is guiltless; that Leontes, unlike Alsemero, has no corroboration for his rampant anxieties from any other quarter. The husband’s suspicions, because so unfounded and illogical, provoke responses that bolster rather than deny the natural and precious connections between husband and wife. Tellingly, all those who hear of Leontes’ accusation against Hermione react not with measured skepticism but with utter disbelief and indignation. Polixenes, Hermione’s supposed bed partner, vehemently denies the affair, vowing, “O then, my best blood turn / To an infected jelly, and my name / Be yok’d with his that did betray the Best!” and “my approach be shunn’d, / Nay, hated too, worse than the great’st infection / That e’er was heard or read” (I.ii.417-24). Here is a man who would have his name put down with that of Judas, who would have his presence be more feared and
avoided than the worst of diseases and infections, if it were true that he had slipped between a husband and wife. And while other men do not have the same impetus to defend their own personal honor as well as Hermione’s in the matter, their responses are no less passionate. One of Leontes’ lords avows, “For her, my lord, / I dare my life lay down – and will do’t, sir; / Please you to accept it – that the Queen is spotless / I’ th’ eyes of heaven and to you” (II.i.129-32), and Antigonus concurs, assuring his king, “It is for you we speak, not for ourselves. / You are abus’d, and by some putter-on / That will be damn’d for’t” (II.i.140-2). These comments, with references to heaven and damnation, continue the religious theme Polixenes advanced when he drew a parallel between a male adulterer and Judas. Heaven would hate to see a breach between husband and wife pass before its “eyes,” and the one who would falsely allege such an unnatural breach does not even deserve to enter heaven. Indeed, such a thread is nicely in keeping with the reality that the gods themselves controvert Leontes: when the “seal’d-up oracle, by the hand deliver’d / Of great Apollo’s priest [at Delphos]” (III.ii.127-8) is opened, it proclaims, “Hermione is chaste…Leontes a jealous tyrant” (132-3). In a circuitous but powerful manner, the union of man and woman in marriage is painted as holy in *The Winter’s Tale*.

With this framework firmly in mind, we can turn to the children created by such a union, who may be read not only as emblems of their parents’ connection but also as figures deeply impacted by notions of proximity and distance in their own right. Central to any such discussion is the mother; in this case, Hermione. Concurrent with the elements of the plot discussed thus far is the recognition that the accused wife is also an expectant mother. Although readers of the play are unaware of Hermione’s pregnancy until it is referenced by another character, the audiences for whom the play was written
would have ocular confirmation, from the moment the queen steps on stage, that she is soon to deliver another heir to the kingdom. And, for audience and reader alike, the physical and rhetorical space that Hermione’s graphically maternal body occupies is acknowledged overtly: one of Hermione’s ladies notes to Mamillius, “Hark ye, / The Queen your mother grows round apace: we shall / Present our services to a fine new prince / One of these days” (II.i.15-18), and another lady promptly agrees, “She is spread of late / Into a goodly bulk” (II.i.19-20). The expectant mother is just as quick to reference her own condition: as Caroline Bicks briefly notes amidst a larger examination of Paulina as midwife, Hermione entreats her husband for ladies to attend her in her “plight” (II.i.118) as she is led to prison and upbraids him for denying her “the child-bed privilege,” the express right of “women of all fashion” (III.ii.103-4) in the era to enjoy a recovery period with female attendants after giving birth (Bicks 183). Hermione’s pregnancy is figured, then, as a central rather than peripheral element of The Winter’s Tale. Her status as a mother is visible in her very frame, in the “round” stomach in which her ladies rejoice, and in her pointed reminders of her condition to the baby’s own father.

With Hermione’s body eloquently speaking to union with Leontes, to their conception of a child as husband and wife, it can never be far from the audience’s eyes and mind that as Leontes maligns his wife, he maligns a mother as well. As he furiously works to disentangle himself from the snares of the bed he once shared with Hermione – the “goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps” (I.ii.327-9) that her supposed transgression littered there – his actions entail not only a permanent disruption of the relationship that produced Mamillius and Perdita but also a violation of the bond existing between mother and child. Indeed, these two disruptions and violations are intertwined, as Hermione herself notes in
her compelling retaliation to her husband’s threats of death. Her grievances are much more grave and unnatural than simply being denied her days of postpartum recuperation:

HERMIONE Sir, spare your threats.
The bug [death] which you would fright me with, I seek.
To me can life be no commodity;
The crown and comfort of my life, your favor,
I do give lost, for I do feel it gone,
But know not how it went. My second joy
And first-fruits of my body, from his presence
I am barr’d, like one infectious. My third comfort
(Starr’d most unluckily) is from my breast
(The innocent milk in it[s] most innocent mouth)
Hal’d out to murther.

(III.ii.92-101)

While Hermione’s connection to her husband is certainly noted, Leontes being no less than “the crown and comfort of her life,” this is a passage that foregrounds maternity, that focuses primarily on the “fruits” of male and female union. The physical connections between mother and child, the bonds that Leontes has split, are dwelt on in poignant detail, especially when read alongside certain earlier scenes and discourses of the period.

In a most definitive statement on the necessity of connection between man and woman, a son in this play is literally killed by separation from his mother. The bond Hermione shares with Mamillius, whose very name means “little breast” and thus bears a connection to the maternal, shines in brief but touching interludes. Entreating a child’s story from her son, she teases, “Come on [good sir], sit down, come on, and do your best / To fright me with your sprites; you’re pow’rful at it” (II.i.26-8), and, when Mamillius expresses a desire to tell his tale in softer tones, Hermione readily concedes, “Come on then, / And give’t me in mine ear” (II.i.31-2). The young boy shows no hesitancy in his relationship with his mother, no desire to distance himself either physically by telling his story from a few feet away or emotionally by refusing to share his imagination and
creativity with her. And in bemoaning the pain of a severed mother-son relationship, Hermione also spells out the reality of that connection. While she is deeply saddened to have lost Leontes’ favor, her description of separation from her son is far more graphically represented: “My second joy / And first-fruits of my body, from his presence / I am barr’d, like one infectious” (III.ii.96-8). Mamillius was once part of Hermione’s very body, but now she has been declared a source of infection to him rather than a source of nourishment and life. She is “barred” from a person who was once a part of her physical self, who could not have been separated from her save by the most drastic of measures. In short, the connection that Mamillius and Hermione share is one of the most obvious and natural connections between a male and female that exists, but Leontes’ accusations usher in the specter of the infectious mother from the introductory chapter. It is a wholly unnatural image, that of a mother being deadly to the body she once harbored.

The king has that image in mind when he orders, “Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him” (II.i.56-8). To a modern eye, this is an illogical statement, as though it were possible to parcel out the pieces of a child that come from the father and from the mother, as though Mamillius would be somehow less Leontes’ child if Hermione had nursed him. In the context of early modern England, however, such a fear was pervasive. In an analysis of the debate over nursing in the era, Rachel Trubowitz highlights what it is that terrifies Leontes. The very title of her piece – “‘But Blood Whitened’: Nursing Mothers and Others in Early Modern Britain” – spells out her fundamental thesis: with the period’s medical belief that breast milk is simply a whitened manifestation of blood, there was a coexisting conviction that the milk “transmits the moral and bodily character” (84).
of the nursing woman to the child. Trubowitz convincingly argues that this led to an increased call for mothers to nurse their own children, as fears of the “other” were pervasive in early modern England and there was always a possibility that a wet nurse might be of a class or religion that the parents would be aghast to have delivered into their child (86-7). Of course, as Trubowitz also notes, having a mother breastfeed her child entails its own complications when, as in Leontes’ case, the husband perceives his wife to be “a corrupt and hostile foreign body” herself (84). That perception holds disparate but equally critical implications for the husband and wife: while Leontes takes a certain level of comfort in knowing that Hermione’s moral character never entered his son’s mouth, Hermione cries out for the daughter wrenched away from her body. She mourns, “My third comfort…is from my breast / (The innocent milk in it[s] most innocent mouth) / Hal’d out to murther” (III.ii.98-101). Perdita is hauled away by her father’s command, the nourishing and powerful milk of her mother still coursing through her infant body. Though it is correct to suggest that Leontes is eager “to wrest back control over the influence and shaping of his children” (Woodford 188), an influence physically embodied by breast milk, it is also critical to note that Leontes is punished for ripping away his children from the physical bond they shared with Hermione. This fact, never treated by Rose or Woodford, is fundamental to the drama’s stance on motherhood.

Most obviously, because of Leontes’ actions, Mamillius suffers terribly before surrendering his life. Leontes reads his son’s “sickness” (II.iii.11) after Hermione is sent to prison – “He straight declin’d, droop’d, took it deeply…Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep, / And downright languish’d” (II.iii.14-17) – as the natural response of a boy “conceiving the dishonor of his mother” (II.iii.13). Shakespeare’s word choice in
these lines hints at precisely the reality Leontes is blindly overlooking: the king never appears to consider that Mamillius is displaying physical manifestations of emotional turmoil, that he is “languishing” not because he “conceives” his mother’s dishonor but, rather, because he is aching to re-connect with the woman who conceived him. Leontes pays for his grave mistake with the loss of his firstborn son, his heir. Mamillius is unable to bear the notion that he may be permanently separated from Hermione, and the thought of that possibility is enough to take his final breath. As a distraught servant pronounces, “O sir, I shall be hated to report it! / The Prince your son, with mere conceit and fear / Of the Queen’s speed, is gone” (III.ii.143-5). This young boy’s distance from his mother operates like an actual disease, stealing his appetite and sleep and paralyzing his once youthful vigor, and, without the antidote of Hermione’s proximity, the disease takes its full effect. According to Paulina, what killed Mamillius was certainly not a suspicion of his mother’s crime but rather the “cleft heart / That could conceive a gross and foolish sire / Blemish’d his gracious dam” (III.ii.196-8). The notion that such a blemish might mean a permanent separation from Hermione was too heavy for her young son to handle, an assertion well supported by a second utilization of the double meaning of “conceive.”

Set beside this dramatic depiction of a parent-child and male-female relationship, of a connection so intense that it can sustain or destroy life, Leontes’ treatment of his infant daughter, Perdita, is all the more disturbing. His unfounded yet unwavering belief that Hermione and Polixenes were clandestine lovers leads him to deny his part in his own daughter. In the move that forever alters his bond with Perdita and later returns to rebuke him, Leontes is entirely blind to the visible connection he shares with this newborn child:

PAULINA
It is yours…
So like you, ‘tis the worse. Behold, my lords,
Although the print be little, the whole matter
And copy of the father – eye, nose, lip,
The trick of ’s frown, his forehead, nay, the valley,
The pretty dimples of his chin and cheek, his smiles,
The very mould and frame of hand, nail, finger.

(II.iii.97-103)

In the very infant whose paternity Leontes disclaims, his connections to two females – his wife and the daughter created by that union – are readily apparent. Perdita is like a book in which, “although the print be little,” every word and every page points to Leontes. For a man so concerned with how much of Hermione exists in Mamillius, one might expect Leontes to delight in the reproduction of his own image in Perdita. Once again, however, his misguided effort to distance himself from his wife poisons a natural male-female bond: in this instance, that of father and daughter. Rather than embracing the young princess who speaks her close connection to her father in her very frame, Leontes is eager to distance himself, raging, “Hence with it, and together with the dam / Commit them to the fire” (II.iii.95-6) or, short of death, “carry / This female bastard hence, and…bear it / To some remote and desert place quite out / Of our dominions, and leave it…to it[s] own protection” (II.iii.174-8). Destroying one final male-female relationship because of his blindness, Leontes banishes Perdita to a foreign land, severing daughter from father as he already had son from mother. Audiences are left with the unnatural picture of an infant in the wild rather than in the home and care of her parents, of the father she so resembles.

Within the first three acts of The Winter’s Tale, then, Leontes’ groundless jealousy systematically dismantles his family, breaking apart the male-female relationships that naturally entail proximity and, in some instances, actually require it if both parties are to flourish. The criticism that Leontes encounters from all quarters over this effort to breed distance between himself, his wife, and their offspring speaks eloquently to how natural
and necessary the connections between husbands and wives and parents and children truly are. What dramatically heightens that conclusion in this particular play is Leontes’ position as king and his nation’s subsequent concerns over an heir. This aspect of the drama is introduced in the first scene when Camillo, a lord of Sicilia, confidently avows, “They that went on crutches ere [Mamillius] was born desire yet their life to see him a man” (I.i.39-41). Here are old men who would “be content to die” (I.i.42) if not for the cherished dream of gazing upon the prince, heir to their nation’s throne, as a grown man. And, while Perdita does not enjoy the privileges of being a male heir, a daughter can certainly, through marriage, expand a kingdom as well. Within such a context, Leontes’ efforts to cleave his family look all the more egregious and unnatural. When he banishes his daughter to “some remote and desert place quite out / Of our dominions,” he sends away from his territories the very woman who might have someday helped to broaden them. When he rushes Mamillius away from Hermione and willfully misunderstands the warning signs of grave sickness in his son, he is disturbing not only the health of his son but the sound health of his kingdom, the almost supernatural health of the many old men who are delaying their dying breath to see their young prince mature. This play, then, speaks to the devastating effects of distance on a grand scale: what Leontes does to shatter and distance relationships has consequences that reach far beyond his own family.

Indeed, given the negative judgment of Leontes’ actions implicit in The Winter’s Tale, perhaps it should be little surprise that he is never fully pardoned for his crimes. By the conclusion of the play, even with Perdita’s return to Sicilia and Hermione’s mystical and miraculous return from the grave, it is clear to a discerning audience that Leontes can no longer unite in a significant way with either woman. This reality is played out even on
the physical level: the infant girl who could once be read as the mirror image of Leontes has transformed into a sixteen-year-old woman who strikingly resembles Hermione. One gentleman of Sicilia who observes the reunion of Leontes and Perdita recounts “the majesty of the creature in resemblance of the mother…and many other evidences [that] proclaim her, with all certainty, to be the King’s daughter” (V.ii.35-9). Leontes’ daughter she undoubtedly is, yet Perdita no longer seems to bear any visible markers of that physical connection, markers upon which Paulina once eloquently rhapsodized when she sought to convince Leontes of his paternity. This sudden and strange absence of visible connection between Leontes and Perdita is noteworthy, speaking in a symbolic way to the destructive act of distancing that infant girl from the father to whom she clearly belonged.

The distance between Leontes and Perdita, moreover, is not relegated to appearance. The same gentleman who easily discerned Perdita’s resemblance to her mother continues in recounting her return to Sicilia with the observation, “Our king, being ready to leap out of himself for joy of his found daughter, as if that joy were now become a loss, cries, ‘O, thy mother, thy mother!’; then asks Bohemia forgiveness; then embraces his son-in-law; then again worries he his daughter with clipping her” (V.ii.49-54). It is as if Leontes is attempting to atone for all his past errors at once: he repeatedly “clips” or embraces the daughter whom he was once so desperate to cut away cleanly; he acknowledges his mistake in impugning the mother whom Perdita’s very image now recalls; and he draws Florizel close to him as well, this individual being the closest thing to a son Leontes will ever enjoy after his self-inflicted loss of Mamillius. There is no reason to believe that Perdita responds to her father’s joy angrily or attempts to detach herself from him; however, it is intriguing that we as an audience do not see any type of response to
Leontes’ exuberance. We are privy to the reunion scene only through a third party, and the gentleman narrating the scene omits any mention of Perdita’s reaction to her newly discovered father’s embrace. According to this narrator, Perdita’s affection and emotion for Hermione are what the onlookers of this momentous day will forever hold in memory:

3. GENT. One of the prettiest touches of all, and that which angled for mine eyes…was when, at the relation of the Queen’s death (with the manner how she came to’t bravely confess’d and lamented by the King), how attentiveness wounded his daughter, till (from one sign of dolor to another) she did (with an ‘Alas!’), I would fain say, bleed tears; for I am sure my heart wept blood. Who was most marble there chang’d color; some swounded, all sorrow’d. If all the world could have seen’t, the woe had been universal.

(V.ii.82-92)

Perdita so aches for her mother that the gentleman believes her to have wept blood rather than water, a potent bodily reminder of the blood and breast milk – “blood whitened” – imparted to her by Hermione. The living parent, Leontes, is almost tangential to the action: Perdita, to an audience’s knowledge, neither demonstrates mutual affection for the father so overjoyed to have her close to him at last nor castigates him for the part he admits to playing in his wife’s demise. Instead, she is eager to follow Paulina to her mother’s statue; eager to follow the woman who, upon reuniting with Perdita, “lifted the Princess from the earth, and so lock[ed] her in embracing, as if she would pin her to her heart” (V.ii.76-8). It is, tellingly, only this embrace and heart to which Perdita responds.

Leontes’ position at the play’s periphery is further and firmly established in its final scene. Upon her mystical return to the action of *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione beseeches,

**HERMIONE**

You gods, look down  
And from your sacred vials pour your graces  
Upon my daughter’s head! Tell me, mine own,  
Where hast thou been preserv’d? where liv’d? how found  
Thy father’s court? for thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserv’d
Myself to see the issue.

(V.iii.122-8)

Like Perdita before her, Hermione has no upbraiding words for Leontes; onlookers note, in fact, that “she embraces him” and “hangs about his neck” (V.iii.111-2). Significantly, however, these physical signs that reunion with Leontes might one day be possible are attended by Paulina’s musing, “Nay, present your hand. / When she was young, you woo’d her; now, in age, / Is she become the suitor?” (V.iii.107-9). Whereas Leontes once sought Hermione’s “white hand” (I.ii.103) and the beautiful union represented by that hand’s opening, it is now upon Hermione’s cue alone that their relationship will resume. Just as Leontes banished his ability to foster mutuality with Perdita when he banished her to a foreign land, so he forfeited his right to claim the foremost place in Hermione’s consideration when he forfeited the natural union they enjoyed as husband and wife. Hermione’s only words at the play’s conclusion make abundantly clear that her primary interest and concern for the time is her daughter. She emphasizes that she “preserv’d [herself] to see the issue” of her union with Leontes, not to see Leontes himself. While Shakespeare certainly never precludes the possibility that renewed closeness with Perdita and Hermione might eventually emerge for Leontes, his play is careful to point out that such connection in male-female relationships is immensely fragile, immensely important, and that trifling with those connections is an act with quite severe repercussions attached.

Several aspects of The Winter’s Tale, and particularly of its conclusion, should now stand in a different light than that shed by Rose or Woodford. Woodford’s claim that “The Winter’s Tale provides a fantasy of male control over reproduction and nurture without the painful permanent loss of wife and child suffered by Macduff, or the paternal
guilt placed upon Pandosto [a forerunner of Shakespeare’s Leontes]” (188) is particularly debatable. First, it overlooks the celebration of “reproduction and nurture” inherent in the play’s conclusion: Bicks’ reading, for example, emphasizes that the scene in Paulina’s chapel is fraught with references to powerful pagan goddesses and their rituals and very much centered on Paulina’s power as midwife to deliver Hermione to the world and Perdita’s eagerness to participate in the female sphere in which she suddenly finds herself (183-5). Also, and perhaps more importantly, Woodford overlooks the multiple ways in which Leontes does suffer “painful permanent loss” as the direct result of his violation of the unions between husband and wife and mother and child, a crucial element of the play.

Leontes’ losses are vast. He has forever lost his son: Mamillius does not miraculously reappear with his mother, and Florizel never once offers to Leontes the same comfort that Alsemero did to Vermandero, the promise of “a son’s duty living” (Changeling V.iii.215). Any visible or emotional bond that Perdita might feel with her father is markedly absent from the play: when compared to the beauty of Cordelia’s restorative kiss to her father’s broken frame – “O my dear father, restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have…made” (Lear IV.vii.25-8) – and her weeping for him – “Be your tears wet? Yes, faith” (IV.vii.69), Lear realizes in his own sorrow – Perdita’s blood tears for her lost mother and seeming indifference to Leontes speak to the utter disconnect that the father’s actions precipitated. Finally, though Leontes desires a physical reunion with his wife, eager as he is to kiss the statue no matter how men may “mock” him (V.iii.78-9), their union will now be less fruitful. Rose and Woodford both read Hermione’s aged body as the ultimate proof that Shakespeare was interested in a purely conservative interpretation of
motherhood: Hermione is now an infertile and, thus, unthreatening presence. Such a contention does not account, though, for the play’s construction of an ideal husband-wife relationship as fruitful and holy, best expressed by Leontes himself in his description of his marriage proposal, or for Leontes’ burning desire to join with his wife and daughter again. If we read Hermione’s inability to give Leontes another child as condemnatory, we must realize that it condemns not the mother in the scene but the father who severed his family. *The Winter’s Tale*, far from sublimating the mother and devaluing her role, shows a man whose disruption of that role garners nothing but “painful, permanent loss.”
Conclusion

From the medical genre of writing to the compelling final message of *The Winter’s Tale*, this thesis has sought both to trace and to enrich discourses on male-female relationships in early modern England. While it is undeniable that barriers to union between the two sexes existed in the era, too narrow a focus on that reality eclipses a vast range of competing and complicating discourses. Crooke’s image of a man and woman locked in “mutuall embracements,” Cleaver and Dod’s portrait of matrimony as “a coupling together of two persons into one flesh, according to the ordinance of God,” and Touteville’s sketch of a benevolent rather than authoritarian father in *St. Paul’s threefold cord*, to name but a few of these discourses, captivatingly suggest that alternate constructions of male-female relationships were circulating in and influencing the period. Moreover, when we do turn to consider distance between men and women and the potential walls to their union in early modern England, we grasp that distance was *not* widely perceived as a desirable or natural state. It is holy connection to a wife that Alsemero craves, reunion with a daughter that heals Lear’s madness and impacts his vision of fatherhood, and separation from his wife and daughter that deeply wounds Leontes. In each drama considered, distance between the two sexes is a devastating circumstance, resulting in imprisoned wives, broken fathers, and even deceased children, rather than an attractive prospect to be sought. Therefore, while this thesis does not dispute that societal anxieties and strictures in early modern England often negatively impacted “mutuall embracements,” it offers the fascinating conclusion that those embraces constituted not a distortion of societal mandates but an embodiment of the era’s belief that union between men and women is, at its core, a natural and holy state.
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