Divided Fathers, Divided Kings: Echoes of *Arcadia* in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Introduction

The parallels between Philip Sidney's *New Arcadia* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear* have long been recognized by scholars. In his introduction to the Arden edition of *King Lear,* R.A. Foakes notes that "for the action involving Gloucester and his two sons Shakespeare remembered an episode in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia,*" and describes the scene in which Mucidorus and Pyrocles encounter an old man being led by a younger one, who turns out to be his son.[1] While it is clear that Sidney's text influenced *King Lear*'s Gloucester plot, it seems negligent to ignore the possibility that *Arcadia* had an impact on other parts of the play. The Gloucester plot is not the only example of a divided family in *Lear;* Lear and his daughters also (somewhat more obviously) represent the problems that arise when division occurs.

The actions and behavior of Lear in Shakespeare's play heavily mirror those of Basilius in *Arcadia*. Both men have traits that connect them to the ideas of divided family and divided nation within their stories. In highlighting this connection between Lear and Basilius, I aim to show the importance of examining these two texts' relationship in greater detail. I analyze the ways in which Lear's behavior as father and king echoes that of Basilius in order to show that *Arcadia* had a more extensive influence on *King*

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Lear than has previously been shown. Both texts present rulers who divide themselves from their family; in doing so, they also present a divided nation, one which can only be healed through reconciliation.

The *Arcadia*/*Lear* Relationship

Lear and *Arcadia* are most often tied to each other through the influence the latter had on the former's subplot. The key connection is highlighted in George Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare.* Shakespeare, he writes, was focused more on "the emotional and ethical implications of the story" than on details of setting.[2] This interest led him to highlight the interplay of family relationships within the text and "he recalled the story of the blind Paphlagonian king in Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590), who believed his wicked son and rejected his good one and was physically blinded by the former and cherished by the latter."[3] Although Sidney's story appears to be present only in the Gloucester subplot—Edmund as the son who Gloucester trusts and Edgar as the one he rejects—it appears within Lear's story as well, in his acceptance of Regan and Goneril and his rejection of Cordelia.

Bullough notes that both Gloucester and Lear, like Sidney's nameless king, are sent to wander the world. Similarly, Lear takes on the role of a father "who could barely subsist as a beggar at men's doors," which he also shares, in part, with Edgar.[4] Most significantly, Bullough notes that both Lear and Gloucester die "between joy and grief," as the Paphlagonian king does at the end of Sidney's story.[5] In Bullough's reading, Shakespeare wanted to show how the main plot and subplot are related, and "their emotional relationships and final interweaving are so close that it is misleading to speak of 'main-plot' and 'under-plot.'"[6] Bullough is only one of many scholars to comment on the influence of *Arcadia* on *Lear;* in fact, it seems almost impossible for critics writing on the play to *not* mention it. Both R.A. Foakes and Stephen Greenblatt mention the play's debt to *Arcadia* in their respective critical introductions to *King Lear,* and critics William A. Oram and Anthony D. Weiner also reference its influence on Shakespeare's plot.[7]

Although the Gloucester plot is a popular topic for scholars, criticism on *Arcadia* and *Lear* does extend beyond it. Although it highlights the intertwined *Arcadia/Lear* relationship, Thomas

McFarland's essay "The Image of the Family in *King Lear*" is most interested in the importance of family dynamics in Shakespeare's play. According to McFarland, *Lear* is unique in its portrayal of family because it "involves a different model of experience, an image of family life that is neither flamboyant nor unique. On the contrary, it is in significant respects almost commonplace."[8] Compared to the story's source material, Shakespeare's play presents readers with "an image of the family in dynamic interaction, an image intensified and underscored by being doubled into parallel plots."[9] At the heart of the play's problems are, McFarland argues, Lear's conflation of his role as king with his role as father; in acting as a father rather than a king and dividing his kingdom, Lear sets the tragedy in motion.[10] Greenblatt similarly comments on the familial drama present in the play; "In *King Lear,*" he writes, "Shakespeare explores the dark consequences of this dream [of commanding obedience and love] not only in the state but also in the family, where the Renaissance father increasingly styled himself 'a little God.'"[11] He also makes note of the Gloucester subplot, arguing that its "unusually full and intense treatment […] has the effect of suggesting that what is at stake extends beyond the royal family alone, that the roots of the tragedy lie deep in the nature of things."[12] Both of these critics highlight the significance of the familial role in *Lear,* not just in the main plot but in the subplot as well. Because these two plots are so closely intertwined, it seems foolish to not pay attention to the familial aspects of Lear's story.

Conflated Bodies: Misunderstanding the Body Politic and the Body Natural

Both *Arcadia* and *King Lear* demonstrate the struggles of being placed into dual roles of power. Basilius and Lear struggle with being both kings and fathers and understanding the boundaries between their two roles. In fact, their weaknesses lie in their lack of division between roles. Basilius does not recognize the issues which arise when he attempts to act for the benefit of his body natural, rather than his body politic; Lear struggles similarly, but conflates his role as father with his role as king, rather than consciously trying to separate the two. Both men fail to comprehend the ways in which their body natural and their body politic are interconnected. Although neither man realizes it, their decisions as men and fathers

have negative effects on their nation, equally dividing their families and their kingdoms.

Basilius's struggle with his dual roles comes to a head in his extreme response to the oracle's prophecy. Receiving what he perceives to be a horrible prophecy, Basilius acts to prevent it, and uproots his entire family to live in the woods of Arcadia. Although this act of paternal protection seems innocent enough, its effects on Basilius's body politic are devastating, as his counselor Philanax predicts. Basilius has not had any problems with his people until this point, Philanax notes. "Why," he asks, "should you deprive yourself of government for fear of losing your government, like one that should kill himself for fear of death? Nay, rather, if this oracle be to be accounted of, arm up your courage the more against it, for who will stick to him that abandons it?"[13] This prophecy, Philanax argues, is merely that—a prophecy. In acting to prevent it, Basilius risks damaging the relationship he has with his people—the relationship of head to body. Running in fear to the woods shows Basilius's weakness and damages his relationship with the body politic. In doing so, he separates the body natural from the body politic, cutting the head off the political body and leaving it leaderless. Abandoning his people makes Basilius a weak king, even if it seemingly makes him a better father.[14]

Philanax also reacts negatively to Basilius's decision about how to treat his daughters. Having learned from his friend that Basilius intends to keep Pamela and Philoclea from marrying, Philanax writes, "what shall I say, if the affection of a father to his own children cannot plead sufficiently against such fancies?" (81). In choosing to prevent his daughters' marriage, Philanax argues, Basilius is making an unnatural choice. As the girls' father, he should want them to find fulfilling marriages and provide him with grandchildren to make his old age better. Because he only knows Basilius's responses to the prophecy and not its contents, Philanax is completely baffled by this choice. What horrifies him more, however, is Basilius's decision to separate his daughters and place them into two houses. Dividing the girls is bad enough, but placing Pamela under the protection of her father's foolish friend Dametus "comes of a very evil ground that ignorance should be the mother of faithfulness" (82). Basilius's choice will not encourage goodness and faithfulness in his elder daughter, but rather place

her under the control of a man whose ignorance will serve only to harm her. Basilius's decision to ignore his friend's advice helps to set many of the events Philanax fears in motion, and leads to a rending in two of the family unit.

While Basilius literally divides his daughters by placing them in separate houses, Lear takes division one step further by dividing his kingdom between them. Even prior to beginning his love game, Lear has already decided on his division of Britain; it only remains to be seen which child will receive the largest piece. Because Lear believes his role as father to be the same as his role as king, he does not understand the inherent problem presented by his division of the kingdom.[15] Fathers are able to divide their lands among their children, because there is no overarching power attached to the act. Kings, however, cannot divide their land without dividing their body politic. The land is not merely an economic boon, something that will help to support Lear's daughters and secure their futures, but also the very essence of Britain. In breaking Britain into pieces, Lear is breaking apart the body politic, something which should never be disunited.[16]

Lear also fails in his role as father, however, by not identifying Cordelia's lack of performance with the true nature of her love for him. In challenging his daughters to swear their love "[t]hat we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge," Lear asks for a performance of love from his daughters instead of the real thing.[17] This is evident in the responses given by Goneril and Regan; both women utilize strongly poetic language in order to convey just how deeply they care for him. Regan's words, especially, highlight the performative and competitive nature of this contest. When asked by Lear to give her answer, she responds that, although she and Goneril are both of similar mettle, "In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love: / Only she comes too short" (1.1.69-72). Goneril and Regan's joint declarations of love echo the fawning comments of courtiers towards their monarch; although possibly sincere, they do not truly embody the love that the speakers claim to feel. Cordelia, however, by saying only "Nothing" (1.1.87), refuses to play this manipulative love game. "Unhappy that I am," she tells her father, "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.91-3). Lear's inability to recognize the truth

of Cordelia's love in comparison to that of Goneril and Regan is a failure of his role as father, which he takes to be an attack on his role as king. Lear's conflation of his roles means that he does not truly recognize the love Cordelia has for him; instead, he willfully banishes the one daughter who cares for him, preferring the empty promises of Goneril and Regan to Cordelia's truth.

Both Basilius and Lear fail to understand the two roles that they play within their narratives. Basilius, in forsaking his body politic for the sake of his body natural out of love for his daughters, ignores the way his act will appear to his people. He forgets that, as king, he is not just a father to the children of his body, but also to the people of Arcadia. In moving to protect his blood children alone, rather than considering the fate of the country as a whole, Basilius negatively affects his relationship with his people. Similarly, Lear's conflation of his two paternal roles leads him to damage not only his relationships with his daughters, but also his relationship with his country.

Both men split apart their daughters and, in turn, the lands that they rule, without fully comprehending the consequences of their actions. Arcadia begins to fall apart because of Basilius's decision, as a small revolution, led by Cecropia's man, Clinias, is able to attack the royal family's retreat in the woods. This group of "clowns and other rebels" have nothing tethering them to their compatriots; instead, "so many as they were, so many almost were their minds, all knit together only in madness" (Sidney 379). Without their head, Basilius, to lead them and direct their movements, the people of Arcadia are not unified. The lack of a head splinters the body of Arcadia, connecting its parts together "only in madness," and not through the leadership of their king.

Similarly, by dividing the kingdom between his daughters and removing himself from the throne, Lear has deprived his people of a true head. He himself does not seem to recognize this result; the madness of the body politic in *Arcadia* is instead inscribed upon Lear's physical body. Denied the trappings of power by Goneril and Regan, Lear chooses to "abjure all roofs" and "[t]o wage against the enmity o'th'air" rather than admit his loss (2.2.397-8). Although he warns Regan to "not make [him] mad" (2.2.407), not long after his abjuration he is revealed to be wandering the landscape in a crazed state. Speaking to the weather around him,

Lear almost acknowledges his own responsibility for the division he has created, but still fails to comprehend his actions fully. "Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters," he cries;

> I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness.
> I never gave you kingdom, called you children;
> You owe me no subscription. Why then, let fall
> Your horrible pleasure. […]
> But yet I call you servile ministers
> That will with two pernicious daughters join
> Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head
> So old and white as this. (3.2.15-18, 20-4)

At first, Lear appears to recognize his fault—his gift to his children of the kingdom has led to the situation he finds himself in now, and he willingly submits. However, he just as quickly decides that Nature has allied itself with Regan and Goneril, and therefore attacks him wrongfully. His gift of power has led to his abuse at the hands of those who should be respectful of his venerable old age. Lear's brief (apparent) clarity is immediately darkened once more by his metaphorical blindness and literal madness; in failing to recognize his fault, he cannot fully acknowledge the damage he has done to his bodies.[18] Lear's madness is therefore the direct result of his decision to divide his power and his body politic. The body politic cannot be divested so easily, a fact which both Basilius and Lear seem not to understand. This straining against division after the fact causes a lack of comprehension, which prevents any recognition of a singular purpose.

As the madness of the Arcadians is triggered by Basilius's division of himself and his family from the body politic, so the division of the kingdom without comprehending the damage to the body politic triggers Lear's breakdown. Both of these forms of madness also highlight the unnatural state which leads to them. Just as it is "unnatural" for the body to have no head (political or physical), it is also "unnatural" for the Arcadian people to have no king—or at least, to have a king who does not fulfill his duties. Similarly, as it is unnatural for the king to attempt to break up the body politic into pieces, so Lear's madness highlights the unnatural separation between body natural and body politic.

Lear and Basilius, however, have not only divided themselves from the body politic; they have also separated themselves from

their family. In dividing his daughters and placing them in separate households, Basilius quite literally divides the family unit. Similarly, Lear's division of the country among Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia leads to a literal separation, as Lear is shuttled between Goneril and Regan and Cordelia is banished to France. This lack of unity within the family mirrors the division of the nation from its king; as the family crumbles, so too does the country. In failing to understand their roles as fathers to their families as well as to their people, Lear and Basilius cause the destabilization of both.

Reconciliation and the End of Division?

The only opportunity both Lear and Basilius have to repair the divisions they have created is through reconciliation. Although we do not see a full reconciliation between either Basilius and the Arcadians or between Basilius and his family within the *New Arcadia,* there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is forthcoming. Zelmane's speech to the Arcadians, which leads them to put aside their weapons and to turn once more to their king, heralds a future reconciliation between Basilius and his body politic. Similarly, Basilius's willingness to fight for the deliverance of Pamela and Philoclea opens up the possibility of their reunification and reconciliation with each other.[19]

Lear, on the other hand, does have a moment of reconciliation with the daughter he has wronged. In his reunion with Cordelia, Lear cannot quite believe that she is there before him, and thinks that she is a spirit come back to haunt him (4.7.46-9). Lear's willingness to admit his wrongdoing allows Cordelia to fully forgive him—although her father says that she has cause to hate him, she refutes this, replying, "No cause, no cause" (4.7.72-5). Reuniting with his daughter also helps to alleviate some of the symptoms of Lear's madness, caused by his splitting of the body politic. Cordelia's return opens the possibility of Lear regaining power and reunifying the king's two bodies.[20] Reconciling with Cordelia allows Lear to begin the work of repairing the damage he has done; however, the play's tragic ending—with Cordelia dead in Lear's arms and the bodies of Regan and Goneril onstage—prevents a true reunion of the family in life. In this sense, then, Lear's reconciliation is a failed one. He has reconciled himself with

part of his family, but not all, and therefore cannot reconcile his two bodies, split asunder as he split his family apart.

Obviously, there is much more to be done in examining *Arcadia* and *King Lear* side by side. The comparisons that I have drawn here are by no means the only ones that can be seen between Basilius and Lear, nor are they the only ones that exist. Much more scholarship remains to be done on the relationship between these two plays, especially outside the direct connection between the Gloucester plot and the Paphlagonian king episode. If scholars can agree that Shakespeare was familiar with this moment in Sidney's text, there are certainly opportunities to consider the possibility that he was familiar with more of the story. In examining the relationships between family and nation, therefore, I hope to open the gates to scholars to critically dissect the parallels between these two texts.

Notes

1. R.A. Foakes, introduction to *King Lear,* ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 100.
2. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare,* vol. 7 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 283.
3. Bullough, *Narrative,* 284.
4. Bullough, *Narrative,* 284.
5. Bullough, *Narrative,* 284. This is not the only connection that Bullough mentions between *Arcadia* and *Lear;* he also notes the possible connection between the story of Plangus and the dialogue between Cecropia and Pamela, in which Pamela "proves the dependence of nature on a benevolent order," to *Lear*'s plot (Bullough 286-7).
6. Bullough, *Narrative,* 286. For a more detailed analysis of the source materials of *King Lear,* including its connection to Book 10 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* I highly recommend consulting Bullough's text.
7. Oram and Weiner are mostly interested in the intertextual nature of the Gloucester plot, with Oram focusing on the changes which Shakespeare made in his play and Weiner on the ways in which Shakespeare's story draws from both *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene.* Greenblatt refers to the Gloucester plot as "a tale [Shakespeare] adapted from an episode in Philip Sidney's prose romance *Arcadia*." See the introduction to this paper for Foakes's critical understanding of *Arcadia* and *Lear*'s relationship. Stephen Greenblatt, introduction to *King Lear,* ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016), 2320.
8. Thomas McFarland, "The Image of the Family in *King Lear,*" *Shakespearean Criticism,* ed. Michael L. LeBlanc, 73 (2003): 104.
9. McFarland, "Image of the Family," 105.
10. McFarland, "Image of the Family," 105-6.
11. Greenblatt, introduction, 2317.

12. Greenblatt, introduction, 2320.

13. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia,* ed. Maurice Evans (New York: Penguin, 1987), 80-1. All future citations will be in-text.

14. It does not, but Basilius seems to think that it does.

15. In fact, McFarland argues that Lear's conflation of his roles is also what leads him to believe he can still hold the power he has as king after his divestment of rule (McFarland 105).

16. Shakespeare's second history tetralogy highlights this issue quite clearly, especially in Gaunt's speech in *Richard II* 2.1, which shows the downfall of the land because of the failures of the king.

17. William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 1.1.52-3. All further citations will be in text.

18. He quite literally believes, as he later tells a disguised Kent, that he is "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60).

19. The possibility of reconciliation with Gynecia in the *New Arcadia* is left somewhat hazy, as there is no definite ending to either Basilius's or Gynecia's obsession with Zelmane. Readers can only hope that they find happiness with each other, in the end.

20. In fact, this is the traditional ending to the Lear story—several sources, including *Faerie Queene* and *The True Chronicle History of King Leir,* say that Cordelia comes back to restore her father to the throne.