Familial Betrayal And Trauma In Select Plays Of Shakespeare, Racine, And The Corneilles

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FAMILIAL BETRAYAL AND TRAUMA IN SELECT PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE, RACINE, AND THE CORNEILLES

by

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DEDICATION

For my parents, who never got to see me get this far, but always knew I could.
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I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their patience and help. Dr. Miller, your willingness to chair this endeavor and to give me encouragement or cattle prods (as the need arose) is much appreciated. I’m grateful that you never gave up on me and you should be nominated for sainthood. Thorne, you have been with me the longest in my academic career and I am more honored and touched than you could ever know for all that you have done to help me, especially this past year. Simply saying thank you seems like far too little recompense for all you’ve done for me. Dr. G, many thanks for all of the talks, advice, and encouragement. You are the best all around professor mentor ever and I want to be like you when I grow up. Dr. Norman, merci beaucoup pour votre aide avec les sections françaises. I learned a lot from you and appreciate it all.

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Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends and family for their unending encouragement (and sometimes exasperation) in cheering me on. Too many to name in the space that I have left, but know that I will never forget and will always be grateful.
ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I will argue that familial betrayal is a central element in sixteenth-century British tragedy and seventeenth-century French tragedy. Family relationships help to define who the characters are and provide a point of identification between the audience and the play. This identification, as Aristotle argues, is necessary for the arousal of pity and fear and thus creates the possibility of catharsis. Fear is a key component of psychological trauma. This is the main link between Aristotle’s theories and modern trauma theory but there are other overlapping ideas that form a basis as to why old tragedies still resonate with today’s audiences. Two of these key elements are the omnipresent familial and social dynamics that must be navigated. Trauma can be inflicted from these interactions both onstage and in reality. I intend to explore how various events traumatize and influence certain characters’ behaviors and reactions. The actions of the families they should be able to trust above all others ultimately lead these characters to make tragic decisions.

I will begin by defining tragedy from an Aristotelian perspective, examining how his formulation is related to the theories held by his more prominent early modern successors. I will then do an overview of trauma theory, specifically Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Betrayal Trauma Theory. Finally, I will apply an analysis based upon these psychological theories to certain characters in my chosen plays. For my exemplary English tragedies I have chosen Shakespeare's Richard III, Hamlet, and King
Lear. For my French tragedies I have chosen Pierre Corneille's Médée, Thomas Corneille's Ariane, and Jean Racine's Iphigénie. These selections were made because, as a whole, these plays represent the various core familial relationships found in early modern tragedies.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theatre is not just about entertaining us; it can also be about teaching us something. Renaissance tragedies do a great deal to teach us something about the human condition. From a theatrical point of view, the characters are not merely theoretical constructs, but are real people reacting to their environment and the events that are unfolding around them. Because of this, the audience can build a personal relationship with the characters (if only through a purely one-sided emotional bond). For Aristotle, one way of doing this is by creating in us a sense of pity or fear for the characters that is relatable to the audience as well.¹ This happens, in part, because we develop a kind of inner connection with a character who is going through some kind of trauma on the stage. This “pathos has a close relation to the sensational reflex of tears. Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is our own level of experience” (Frye, Anatomy 38). The trauma does not have to be exactly the same in order for us to feel this connection though the more closely connected we feel, the more intense the emotions and release we have. Such moments can help us learn how to deal with our own pain because “after a traumatic event there is a compulsory tendency

¹ For further explanation on how the audience can internalize these emotions see Dana LaCourse Munteanu’s chapter on Aristotle in Tragic Pathos: Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy.
toward repetition of some aspect of the experience” (Horowitz, *Stress Response* 20). One way that people can repeat the experience is through witnessing something similar in a play. Thus, theatre can be a kind of therapy that allows a traumatized person to work through issues in a “safe” environment.

When we become emotionally invested in a character, we are more likely to feel pity or fear – not only for them but for ourselves because we develop an emotional attachment. Though the circumstances within the plays may seem a bit extreme, such things can happen in the real world. For the past century we have been deluged by tragic imagery and stories that would have, at one time, seemed impossible. Because of this, it would seem that we would no longer be moved by ancient tragedies. Yet this is not the case because there is something within the stories that still resonates within the modern audience. The likelihood that we could ever be in the same position as the character does not matter because we can relate to the emotional situation that he or she faces. “What this means is that the notion of *vraisemblance* can exercise a pragmatic function of ideological censorship in confirming ‘public opinion’, or even a set of stereotypes equated with public opinion, reinforcing on the imaginary level the power-relationships of everyday life” (Moriarty 523). The tragedies that I have chosen to explore all have at their heart a familial schism prompted by one or more acts of betrayal. I use the word *betrayal* for two reasons. The first reason is that the word is connotatively harsh. It is a brutal word that can evoke the kind of psychological pains that the characters go through. The second reason is that betrayal is also something that many – if not most – people will experience in their lives and thus gives an audience a crucial connection to the play.
Betrayal Trauma theories began to emerge in the early 1990s as a subset of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder which was developed as a way of explaining the psychological disorders of soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War and later expanded to include such violent acts as rape and natural disasters. People soon realized that traumatic reactions need not come from such obvious causes and began creating new terminology (hence the Betrayal Trauma theories). However, though some of the psychological terminology may be recent (i.e. less than a decade old), the exploration of the betrayal effects are nothing new to the literary world. “Descriptions of complex PTSD have abounded in many sources published on severe effects of traumatization dating back to the early Greeks” (Wilson 32). Tragedies have been consistently centered around the idea of people hurting each other. This easily links the plays to trauma theory because the current idea of Betrayal Trauma theory claims that “Both fear and betrayal can be described either as continuous or categorical dimensions of trauma. A trauma can be said to either involve betrayal or not, but can also involve varying degrees of betrayal” (Freyd, Klest, and Allard 85). Key characters are betrayed in some way by the people around them, a betrayal that causes tragic consequences.

Jennifer J. Freyd was one of the first people to delve into Betrayal Trauma and her theory is especially relevant to analyses of such plots because she looks not only at how relationships function between the participants but also how they affect and are affected by society as a whole. While discussing trauma at a conference in 1991, Freyd proposed “that the core issue is betrayal – a betrayal of trust that produces conflict between external reality and a necessary system of social dependence [. . .]. The psychic pain
involved in detecting betrayal, as in detecting a cheater, is an evolved, adaptive, motivator for changing social alliances” (“Memory Repression’’). All of us have experienced some form of betrayal – whether we recognize it at the time in those terms or not:

Betrayal trauma theory proposes that the traumas that are most likely to be forgotten are not necessarily the most painful, terrifying, or overwhelming ones (although they may have those qualities), but the traumas in which betrayal is a fundamental component. This proposition points to the central role of social relationships in traumas that are forgotten. (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 62-63)

Also, the betrayal does not necessarily have to be deeply felt for us to sense a connection to tragic characters who are obviously scarred by their personal traumas.

The idea that we have all experienced betrayal and thus have a means of connecting with tragic characters reflects Aristotle’s theory on Thought, “the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances” (Poetics 63):

[. . .] Aristotle’s account of tragedy contains no reference to the gods or fate. Instead, according to his Poetics, plots with causes and effects determine action. One might say that Aristotle offers a formal, aesthetic account of fate, in the sense that the shape of the drama, with its peripeteia and telos, dictates the rise and fall of the individual. Crucial to his analysis of causation is the process of decision-making or its failure: in other words, the hamartia. (Wallace 138)
We may not be able to speak about what has happened to us for various reasons (two extreme examples being that we are either not consciously aware of the betrayal or that it is too traumatic for us contemplate), but the tragic characters can do that for us. Thought expresses what the Character is trying to relay: “what kinds of things a man chooses or avoids” (Poetics 64).

We go through a series of experiences and changes throughout our lives because we are put into various social situations:

Everyday encounters with the world present us with numerous situations that have the potential to provoke conflicting reactions, but we are aware of them only some of the time. In many cases not only do multiple mental mechanisms evaluate the same event for different qualities, but other mechanisms simultaneously make decisions about behavioral responses without our conscious awareness. (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 91-92)

How we see ourselves in relation to the rest of society is dependent upon our experiences in the home because this is where we learn our deepest lessons. The home should be the one place that is constant as the world around us changes. Unfortunately, these outside influences can often cause family members to behave in non-nurturing, non-supportive ways that lead people to destructive behavior – both on personal and social levels:

Psychological health and fulfilling, constructive relationships have in common wholeness, integration, and connection. Though a certain amount of divided consciousness may be adaptive, even necessary, for functioning, on the whole we are diminished by being separated from parts
of ourselves and each other. (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 194)

People do not cease to be a unique individual once they begin the process of creating their own families. Nor do they cease to be an integral part of their childhood family. Instead, people must learn to navigate both groups at the same time along with others that are formed outside of a familial context. However, “The primary context in which betrayal is experienced is the family, for it is the nucleus that the first love pact is sealed, a pact that menaces and at the same time makes possible individual psychological birth” (Carotenuto 43). The plays that I have chosen have, at their hearts, such conflicts.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, theatre was one of the most important artistic forms because it could reach a very wide audience. Theatrical rules were grounded in the Aristotelian tradition and expanded by the influence of Italian Renaissance theorists. Despite these frameworks, the playwrights’ social realms were the biggest influences upon the plays because “whether or not the playwright grasped it intellectually, this confrontation of fathers and sons with opposing political loyalties illustrates the intensifying individualism requiring personal moral choice that was steadily eroding clan collectivism and replacing it with questions for the individual conscience[. . .]” (Mack, *Everybody’s* 50). The idea that all members of a family – mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins – were to be one big cohesively functioning social group was changing. The core familial unit was growing smaller and smaller as time passed. Family branches broke off from the main group to function on their own:

The ‘nuclear family’, as sociologists call it, where the primary bonding is between father, mother, and children, had been shaking free for a century
or more from the extended kinship family of earlier times, in which the first loyalty is to the clan. Not that this transition was as clear to the people going through it as it seems to students of family history today, or would have been viewed in the same terms in which we view it. Nevertheless, important changes in the character of family bonding were making, and new habits and expectations rubbed elbows with older ones. (Mack, *Everybody’s 49*)

This is one of the connections between Shakespeare, Racine, and the Corneilles. A move towards a more individualistic attitude was also taking place in both countries, and since the playwrights were influenced by the world around them, it is only natural that they should reflect the struggle between the self and the community in their work.²

The clash of family unity against individual interests and societal pressures is tied into the plots and the actions that are performed upon the stage, “so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed” (Aristotle, *Poetics* 67). Without the family disintegration that is occurring in the plays, the plays would not be as compelling. The catharsis comes from the audience’s ability to identify with the betrayals portrayed onstage and thus recognizing how universal such conflicts really are on a very basic level.

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² See Wallace 139.
CHAPTER 2

THEORY

My chosen plays have a theatrical base firmly rooted within theoretical guidelines. The obvious beginning point is Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Since then, many offshoots and variations have sprung up throughout the centuries. It is not my intention in this section to regurgitate every theory nor to give an exhaustive account. That would be both excessive and redundant, as there are numerous anthologies available for such research. Instead, I would like to make a brief overview of some of the key theorists that influenced the various playwrights.

**Aristotle**

Aristotle’s *Poetics* created a solid foundation for dramatic criticism even though the text is brief and possibly not complete (some theorists believe that there is a section missing on comedy). His views of tragedy are not the same as ours nor even the same as those playwrights whose works I will be discussing. However, Aristotle’s ideas are the first that any theatre scholar learns because the *Poetics* has been the theatrical bible for thousands of years. The theoretical arguments are quite sound, but because playwrights have questioned and played with these “rules”, a new study is required every time a dramatic analysis is performed. Aristotle said that tragedies contained six important elements: Plot, Character, Thought (through rhetoric), Diction, Song, and Spectacle.
mainly interested in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and two of the six elements that he lists for it: Plot and Character.

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that:

Tragedy is [. . .] an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in the separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (61)

All of a play’s parts are necessary to the whole, but it is the action within a piece that will move us to catharsis whereby we may purge ourselves of negative emotions. I generalize the emotions because I agree with F. L. Lucas that Aristotle probably meant more than just two emotions:

Too often, however, it is misleadingly assumed that the only emotions supposed by Aristotle to find healthy relief in serious drama are pity and fear. But he does not say ‘by pity and fear producing the relief of these emotions’; he says ‘the relief of such emotions’ – ‘emotions of that sort.’ But of what sort? [. . .] Grief, weakness, contempt, blame–these I take to be the sort of thing that Aristotle meant by ‘feelings of that sort.’ (41-42)

This purgation is done through mimesis because tragedy should imitate the reality of our world or, at least, “what may happen – what is possible according to the law of
probability or necessity” (Poetics 68). We begin imitating things at a young age so that we can learn our “earliest lessons” (Poetics 55). Therefore, when we go to the theatre, we not only have a catharsis, but we also learn a lesson from what has happened upon the stage.

For Aristotle, the most important element is the plot because it is the soul of the tragedy. It is also the most important element because “Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists of action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality” (Poetics 62). This is true, but character can be considered just as important as plot because if we do not care about the people in the tragedy, a catharsis cannot take place. I am specifically referring to a catharsis of pity, an emotion that Aristotle defines as:

[. . .] a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours, and moreover some such evil as is stated in our definition or is more or less of that kind. (Rhetoric)

Tragedy relays such feelings to us through both plot and characters. “All of the actions named by the Greek philosopher involve violent deeds between persons dear to each other, such as relatives and close friends” (Gellrich 230). If plot is the soul of tragedy
then the characters are the heart. The emotional life, the reality as it were, of the characters is what engages us. Charles Hanly supports the idea:

There is an obscurity concerning the emotions selected by Aristotle for this cathartic remedy. They are pity and fear. The obscurity may result from the fact that Aristotle did not understand the unconscious thoughts and affects aroused by tragedy and, in a qualified sense, gratified (abreacted). It is these unconscious thoughts and affects that terminate in a conscious feeling of pity for the tragic hero who suffers a calamity and a fear lest we ourselves suffer a like calamity. (89)

When we become emotionally invested in a character, we are more likely to feel pity or fear – or any other negative emotion – not only for them, but also for ourselves because we develop an emotional attachment. As Hanly points out, “The conscious feelings of pity and fear are released in us by an unconscious identification with the tragic hero that arises from the activation of our own repressed memories and fantasies” (89). The onstage plot may not parallel the audience’s own story but the emotional lives of the characters may very well mesh with those observing them.

Most of the ancient tragedies were based upon myths about events with which the audience was familiar. Using “fantasy” as a basis does not mean that the stories lacked

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3 For an explanation of how an actor’s portrayal can help solidify this connection see Elly A. Konijn’s book *Acting Emotions: Shaping Emotions on Stage* (specifically section 4.3.1).
the necessary “punch” of engaging the audience’s emotions. In fact, Aristotle stresses: “He [the playwright] may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends [. . .] but he ought to show invention of his own, and skillfully handle the traditional material” (*Poetics* 79). So long as the material is handled correctly, it does not matter whether the audience already knows what is going to happen. “The forms of Greek tragedy codify the truth of experience and common understanding. The wildness of incident in King Lear or the alternance of grief and buffoonery in Macbeth are reprehensible [according to neoclassical theory] not because they violate the precepts of Aristotle, but because they contradict the natural shape of human behavior” (Steiner 35). It is the emotional voyage of the performance (both physical and written) that is the key to how well the catharsis is attained.

**Middle Ages**

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, most forms of “entertainment” were considered anathema unless sanctioned by the Church and/or the monarchy. For the Church, plays mainly consisted of biblical stories cycled throughout the year as they corresponded to the Church’s liturgical calendar. At court, entertainment was less about well-plotted stories and more about the comical routines of clowns, minstrels, etc. Paradoxically then, the Church was really the source of keeping alive the kind of theatre we know today. However, some theorists (like Tertullian and Robert Mannyng of Brunne) claimed that plays were against God even if done in His name. Others (like Aelius Donatus and Giovanni Boccaccio) claimed that “entertainment” was a
good way to pass along various messages and teach lessons.

According to Scott R. Robinson, “The majority of performances were held in monasteries at the beginning of the age. Religious drama was performed exclusively in churches until around 1200 when they were performed outside on occasion.” Near the end of the second century (about AD 197), Tertullian was one of the first to protest against such performances because of “the laws of Christian discipline, which forbid, among other sins of the world, the pleasures of public shows” (85). He is unable to give a specific Bible passage that mentions theatre, but instead pulls out a general one by David (Psalms 1.1: “Blessed is the man who has not gone into the assembly of the impious, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scorners.”) and gives it a “special interpretation” (87). Tertullian then adds that dramatic spectacles came too close to imitating the festivals of the pagan gods. Theatre also stirred up all kinds of temptations and emotions that could lead to sin because just “as there is also a lust of money, or rank, or eating, or impure enjoyment, or glory, so there is also a lust of pleasure. [And] the show is just a sort of pleasure” (89).

Tertullian may have held this opinion because of the festival “entertainment” that was still being performed in the small villages. These “folk plays” were usually little more than comical acts that may have had a small story-line going through. Whatever the performance, it was based upon some ancient custom that people found hard to relinquish (Fletcher). These rituals continued through much of the Middle Ages despite (and possibly because of) opposition.

About two hundred years later, Saint Augustine continued the argument that
theatrical performances were corrupting. He too mentions the pagan gods, but in a slightly different manner:

[. . .] those entertainments, in which the fictions of poets are the main attraction, were not introduced in the festivals of the gods by the ignorant devotion of the Romans, but that the gods themselves gave the most urgent commands to this effect, and indeed extorted from the Romans these solemnities and celebrations in their honor. (94)

Poets and playwrights were often mentioned as one and the same. Any kind of fictional work was seen as a kind of poetry. In fact, many of the Roman “plays” were long fictional orations rather than acted plays as we know them. Augustine applauds the Romans who did not glorify poets the same way that the Greeks had. He offers Plato as his ideal example:

[. . .] for he [Plato] absolutely excluded poets from his ideal state, whether they composed fictions with no regard to truth, or set the worst possible examples before wretched men under the guise of divine actions. (99)

So, it would seem that Augustine agreed that liturgical plays were just as sinful as any other form of “entertainment.”

Despite this criticism, the Church continued to sanction liturgical plays. These miracle/passion plays were either enactments of biblical scenes (like the birth of Christ) or allegories (the Prodigal Son). Either way, these pieces were meant to teach the Bible and its messages in a way that would be memorable. They also lacked a certain depth of characterization since the main point was to portray morals and not (necessarily) to
entertain. At first these plays had to be performed in a church or they were seen as evil and thus a sin:

It is forbid him in the decree,

Miracles for to make or see;

For miracles, if thou begin,

It is a gathering, a sight of sin.

He may in the church, through this reason,

Play the resurrection –

.........................

If thou do it in ways or groves,

A sight of sin truly it seems. (Mannyng 1-6, 15-16)

As the years went by, a set stock of plays were developed into a recognizable cycle that, again, corresponded with the liturgical calendar.

At some point these plays moved to the outdoors. The Church continued to hold the power to approve or disapprove of a play, but mainly they tended to be the cycle plays that “dealt with religious figures, biblical writings of the church and sermons of the church” (Robinson) by anonymous authors. There must have come a point when everything was formed and these plays took a turn away from the Church as well as away from the crude folk plays because:

[. . .] it is practicable to prove that there was a steady growth, beginning with a single brief scene acted within the church, by the priests, in Latin,
and almost as part of the liturgy, and developing, in the course of time, into a sequence of scenes, acted by laymen outside the church, in the vernacular, and wholly disconnected from the service. (Matthews 107)

From this break, a greater variety of theatrical forms emerged with the onset of the Renaissance in Italy.

**Italian Renaissance**

Dramatic theory began to change when, in 1536, Alessandro Pazzi published a Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The translation quickly assumed a wide popularity throughout Europe and allowed for Aristotle’s ideas to be re-evaluated and utilized by theorists and playwrights. Some sought to adhere to his ideas to the letter while others sought to push the boundaries.

Julius Caesar Scaliger added on to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as an imitation “of the adversity of a distinguished man; it employs the form of action, presents a disastrous dénouement, and is expressed in impressive metrical language” (Scaliger, Dukore 140). For Scalinger, tragedy was a play that opened tranquilly, but ended horrifically and had high brow characters with polished language. The play merely has to have horrible events for it to be tragic.\(^4\) *Agamemnon* fits this idea because the play does indeed open quietly with a Watchman searching for the bonfire that signals Troy’s fall. When he finally sees it, there is a sense of exultation and anticipation. It is a good feeling

\(^4\) See Scaliger in Clark 61-2.
that quickly turns confusing and ominous when Clytaemnemstra appears and eventually openly talks about her intentions. Throughout the rest of the play, she and the other characters use eloquent language to convey the actions of the past and the future.

Overall, tragic plots are still seen as the purview of royalty. For example, Giovambattista Giraldi Cinthio believed that tragedy is based upon events surrounding royal families (unlike comedy which is set around the lower classes). This idea goes back to Aristotle’s reference to the Greek myths as well as to the surviving Greek tragedies, which mainly concern the fortunes of various royal households (like Agamemnon’s). Cinthio also agreed with the idea that tragedy should inculcate good morals via a purgation brought on by horror and compassion. How the audience gets to that point depends upon the writer’s creativity. For example, Aeschylus had to be very creative in how he conveyed the events since most of the key moments (like murders) were done offstage.

Giovan Giorgio Trissino believed that the audience could better relate to the characters if they showed various and genuine emotions because no human is completely good or bad, but rather complex. He felt that a good way to show various moral shades was through the use of maxims, “speeches which are sententious, moralistic, conclusive, and quickly understood” (132-33). For example, Agamemnon’s speeches do this superbly since all of the action takes place offstage and the audience must rely upon the speeches to convey the imagery for us. Cassandra’s speech, in particular, does an excellent job of giving us a secondary viewpoint on the events before and during the war as well as what is about to happen to her and Agamemnon, “[. . .] the block is waiting. The cleaver streams / with my life blood, the first blood drawn / for the king’s last rites.”
We will die [...]

(Aeschylus 155). Just reading the words on the page evokes such a feeling of anguish that it is easy to imagine how hearing them said would be even more stirring. However, not everyone agreed that such speeches were good enough to get the message(s) across.

Like Scaliger, Lodovico Castelvetro did an intense study and interpretation of the Poetics. From it he formulated the idea of the three unities of time, place, and action. These ideas would lead him in a different direction than Trissino because Castelvetro believed that it was action, not morals, that drove tragedy. The idea that action is the driving force is mainly because royal characters are expected to “take justice in their own hands, following their instincts” (Castelvetro, “On Aristotle’s Poetics” 147). Castelvetro goes on to point out that it does not matter against whom they must exact vengeance (friend or foe) because justice is more important than anyone (including themselves at times). He considers the throne to be the height of human happiness and a place that allows the ultimate power: “What they inflict upon others is never moderate” (Castelvetro, “On Aristotle’s Poetics” 147). Clytaemnestra’s decision and determination to kill Agamemnon would be one such example. Though she is mocked in the play for acting like a man for having such a strong will, those actions only made her all the more regal in her habits and stature. However, while Castlevetro might have approved of the character, he probably would have preferred to see her actually complete the actions on

5 These will be discussed in more detail in the French theory segment since they are the ones who really took this idea to heart and tried to make their tragedies strictly adhere to the principles of each one.
the stage where the audience could witness her vengeance. “Though character is not a part of the action, yet it accompanies it inseparably, being revealed together with the action: hence character ought not to be considered as part separate from the action, for without it the action would not be performed” (Castelvetro, “Poetics” 65). Seeing the murder would have added a great deal of weight to the catharsis by showing the actions instead of merely speaking about them.

Both Castelvetro and Trissino make valid arguments. For Castelvetro, the actions drive everything including the emotions and not the other way around. “Tragedy is an imitation of an action, magnificent, complete, which has magnitude, and comprises each of those species, which represent with speech made delightful separately in its parts, and not by narration, and moreover, induces through pity and fear, the purgation of such passions” (Castelvetro, “Poetics” 65). To a certain extent action being the key element is true because it usually is some kind of motion (e.g. Iphigenia’s death) that sets off all of the reactions (e.g. Clytaemnestra’s need for vengeance) in a play. However, Trissino is also correct in view of characterization because, even though we expect royalty to be above certain emotions, human beings are emotionally complex and certain situations will highlight that.

So, what started out as a simple translation of the Poetics soon evolved into a complex meditation over what plays (specifically tragedies) should be:

It was Aristotle’s opinion that the plot of tragedy and comedy ought to comprise one action only, or two whose interdependence makes them one, and ought rather to concern one person than a race of people. But he
ought to have justified this, not by the fact that a plot is incapable of comprising more actions, but by the fact that the extreme temporal limit of twelve hours and the restriction of place for the performance, do not permit a multitude of actions nor the action of a whole race, nor indeed do they permit the whole of one complete action, if it is of any length; and this is the principal reason and the necessary one for the unity of action, that is, for the limitation of the plot to but one action of one person, or two actions, which by their interdependence can be counted one. (Castelvetro, “Poetics” 64)

Reevaluations of the ancient plays using various theories also created a great basis from which dramatists could explore their art. Since Latin was the language of learning in France and England at the time, these treatises and plays easily crossed the borders giving rise to a multi-cultural debate.6

**British Renaissance**

At the same time that the Italians were rediscovering Aristotle, the British were trying to overcome the centuries of literary constraints placed on them by the Church. Morality plays had taken hold in the Middle Ages and were the dominant structure at the dawn of the Renaissance and continued on throughout the period. “We conclude that one great secret of the Elizabethan synthesis lay in the thoroughness of the co-action between the medieval layers and the new: predominantly, the Senecan and the Italian” (Rossiter

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6 See Castelvetro, “Poetics” 63.
However, these plays began to change and became more complex in nature until the structure finally blurred, and it was difficult to tell the difference between this genre and tragedy.

Morality plays can be divided into two categories: paternoster plays and problem plays. The former deal primarily with particular vices commonly associated with the various ages of man (Rossiter 95). These plays tended to run in a cycle or series of short pieces. The problem plays differed in that they tended to focus on just one particular issue, like dying in *Everyman* (Rossiter 95). Thus the earliest of the morality plays were quite simplistic and very straightforward. The characters were usually named after whatever vice they represented. A.P. Rossiter points out that “The Morality not only got at the dramatic essential of protracted conflict in a world of jarring wills, but also arrived at one of the simple formulae for play-making” (99-100). However, as time went on, the plays became more complex, “The morality tradition urged Elizabethans towards considerations of ordinary ethical and social problems — from murder to remarriage, and mistressing to monopolies [. . .]” (Rossiter 161). The plays began to deal with more than one issue or problem at a time.

As the plays became more complex and social issues began to dominate, Church doctrine began to have less of an influence. Ideas became more socio-political in nature, though there did remain a touch of religiosity:

The old fideistic moulds were cracking, and in the dramatic confusion of the century between Medwall and Marlowe (c. 1493-1593) the play-of-abstractions is part of the struggle to establish new ones, to arrive at values
applicable to the individual life, to man as subject in a state, and as member of a church no longer integrated in an authoritarian and indivisible Christendom. (Rossiter 105)

The themes became less allegorical and more realistic. Creative flexibility with historical topics became important while trying to maintain a sense of verisimilitude:

The old allegory of man’s duty towards God, within His Catholic and universal Church, was narrowed towards the allegory of men’s duties as subjects under a God-representing King. [...] it results in the dramatic treatment of much wider human considerations than were to be met in the fields where man’s soul was the standard in set battles of Cardinal Virtue and Deadly Sin. It positively invites the use of historic examples to justify by past experience the moral — a moral of State. (Rossiter 115)

By using older stories, writers were able to comment on the past as well as the present because they could pick and choose ideas that represented ongoing conflicts in the real world. Also, choosing older material allowed a writer the chance for his or her social commentary to be met with less risk for offense and punishment.

The chronicle play began to emerge and take over the morality play’s canonic prominence:

In England, the chronicle play seems suddenly to have risen into vogue during the last decade of the sixteenth century. At first it was more like an epic poem than a dramatic composition, loosely constructed, covering the entire life of a king or hero, with not even a long distance acquaintance
with the unities. Minor events were often invented, but in the more
important happenings the authors usually made an attempt to follow
history. (Bellinger 198)

Christopher Marlowe was arguably the first and most well known of the playwrights to
experiment with these ideas. Martha Fletcher Bellinger asserts that Marlowe’s Edward
Second is the turning point from the simplistic moralities to the more complex chronicles
because, “For the first time the English history play was pulled up into the tenseness of
true drama. The characters are bold and vivid, conceived amply as taking part in the
sweep of history” (199). She observes that “Marlowe’s Tamburlaine [. . .] was not only
the delight of the Elizabethan public, but in a sense it became a standard according to
which the work of subsequent years was measured, and to which every playwright was
more or less indebted” (Bellinger 201).

At the same time there was also a surge of “academic” drama. The term is two-
fold:

On one [side], it indicates the existence of play-acting and playwriting in
schools, colleges, the Universities, and the Inns of Court. The other aspect
of the ‘academic’ play concerns dramatic form [. . .]. It includes on the
one side, the translations and imitations of Roman Comedy, especially
Plautus; on the other, the later development from acting Seneca through
imitating him in Latin to the third stage of applying his rigid form to
original matter, and in the native language. Here highbrow England was
the cultural borrower from the more erudite world of Italy and France [. .
However, the British playwrights were not content to simply imitate the Ancients. “Academic tragedy, still more academic comedy, made important contributions to the Elizabethan theatre, though the attempt to foist rigid ‘classical’ standards on England was a complete failure” (Rossiter 129). So, British theatre made several major changes.

One of the biggest was the deletion of the Chorus. Instead of the characters revealing their thoughts via monologue to another group on stage, the characters instead performed soliloquies. Thus the audience became a kind of mute Chorus for these characters. The soliloquy added a whole new complexity to drama because characters could be freer to unburden themselves psychologically. “The poverty of the theater was among the conditions of excellence which stimulated the Elizabethan dramatist. He could not depend upon the painter of scenes for interpretation of the play, and therefore was constrained to make his thought vigorous and his language vivid” (Backus). Also, unlike the Ancients, the Elizabethans brought the fights and murders to the forefront. These actions took place on stage before the audience rather than offstage and then talked about, thus allowing the audience to become more emotionally invested in what happens to the various characters. In *A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577), John Northbrooke was one of the first theorists to focus on theatre’s social and psychological affects. He felt that such things should not be practiced anywhere (especially where Christianity was followed). To him, Satan works through such things and much evil has been done because of them. No one is safe when viewing such evil,

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7 Later, the French would also discontinue the use of this literary device.
especially women because it causes them to become lascivious. Also, such
entertainments are against the scriptures. Miracle plays are especially evil. No matter
what the intention of the play is, they are corrupt because of what happens to people
when they participate. Northbrooke expounds harsh punishments for the common
players, but does allow that they would be able to obtain forgiveness if they truly repent
of their sins and become honest workers.

Stephen Gosson, in The School of Abuse (1579) also believed that theatre could
have a negative impact on the audience. However, he does acknowledge that some plays
are good in their intention. He advocates for serious works, but thinks that comedies are
bad because of the revelry they inspire. People should only attend serious works:

If players can promise in words and perform it in deeds, proclaim it in
their bills and make it good in their theatres, that there is nothing there
noisome to the body nor hurtful to the soul, and that everyone which
comes to buy their jests shall have an honest neighbor, tag and rag, cut and
long tail, go thither and spare not. Otherwise, I advise you to keep you
thence [. . .]. (Gosson 166)

That is a pretty substantial request for any kind of creative work.

Thomas Lodge’s A Defence of Poetry, Music, and Stage Plays (1579-80) was a
quick response to Gosson’s ideas. Lodge wanted Gosson to see and admit why plays
were begun in the first place: that they were meant to show man what behaviors to avoid.
Not all plays teach lessons, but the whole genre should not be tossed out because they are
not instructional. A lot of works still strive to teach what should be done and what can
happen if they are not.\(^8\)

A few years later, in 1583, Sir Philip Sidney wrote the most important supportive treatise at the time, *The Defense of Poesy*. This piece was most likely also a response to Gosson’s work:

> When Sidney’s *Defence* was published in 1595, it was already fairly well known, as it had circulated in manuscript for some years. It is rigidly classical in its sections on the drama, and follows the Italian Renaissance scholars in requiring greater verisimilitude, and an adherence to the Unities. (Clark 99)

It also reflected the idea that theatre can be used as a teaching tool, “Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it [. . .] that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end — to teach and delight” (Sidney 169).

Sidney maintains that there are three types of poets: 1) religious, 2) philosophical, and 3) imitators. The poets use these categories as a style of teaching. He holds forth that *seeing* something does not necessarily provoke desire in an audience to do that same action. If anything, it makes the audience want to punish the wrong doer, not mimic them. Only people who are already morally close to the character on stage would not be able to see anything wrong. However, Sidney hopes that such people would get a shock and realize just how close they are to being such a villain and thus learn a lesson.

\(^8\) See Bellinger 246-7
Even though the plays should be instructing the audience, Sidney also thought that they should adhere to the rules of place and time, “[. . .] the two necessary companions of all corporal actions” (174). For Sidney, histories should not begin at the beginning, but at the start of some main event. He also felt that tragicomedies were a base form and thus unworthy of attention. He believed in pure forms of comedy and tragedy. Comedies should delight us, but not necessarily in a way that makes us laugh (because laughter could be seen as a base action and be interpreted in various ways). Tragedies, like histories, should teach us something. Combining the two takes away from both intentions.

In the end, a few playwrights, like Ben Jonson (see Discoveries), agreed with Sydney (see The Defense of Poesy) about how plays should be structured, “Atypically, Ben Jonson tried to establish “correct” literary standards in England” (Dukore 158). However, he was not slavish in his execution of the formulas. Jonson felt that portraying history alone on the stage would be boring. For him, comedy and tragedy were necessary to offset ennui.

The majority of Jonson’s peers, however, were less classical:

Shakespeare, for instance, remarks on “the abuse of distance” as the locale of Henry V is about to change from England to France, and in The Winter’s Tale he suggests it is no crime for him to “slide o’er sixteen years.” Like most Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights of the popular theatre, John Webster admits that he willingly disregards neoclassical

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9 See Clark 99.
rules of playwriting in favor of the sort of play his audience prefers.

(Dukore 158)

In the end it seems that richer plots and more complex characters are what managed to develop out of the conflict between neoclassical rules and audience expectations.

**French Renaissance and Neoclassicism**

The French Renaissance coincided with the British though it took longer for French theatre to develop its great tragedies. Like the British, the French also had a long history with the morality plays of the medieval period. Early on in the Renaissance, French theatre was also influenced by the idea of humanism, which “promoted the revival of Greek and Roman artistic and philosophical models that celebrated the worth of the individual” (Cosper). The lag in French theatrical development was partially caused by the religious wars of the period. During this time, the focus was more on survival and politics than on cultural advancement. However, one playwright stands out during this time: Robert Garnier.\(^\text{10}\) He was both a politician and a poet/playwright. His early plays are modeled after the Senecan tradition and reflect his rhetorical dexterity. His later plays were much closer to the style that we have come to associate with English Renaissance theatre (no chorus, more action, less reliance on rhetoric) and these

influenced both contemporary and later playwrights.\textsuperscript{11} Still, despite Garnier’s influence, the height of French theatre took place many years after the British one. This late shift in form and style is why I chose French playwrights who were popular after Shakespeare’s time and not during. There simply were no comparable French tragedians in the sixteenth century.

Once the political and religious climate settled, the theatre was once again able to flourish. Playwrights and theorists continued to look to the past, namely to the ancient world, for inspiration and guidance:

\begin{quote}
Outre toutes ces regles prises de la Poëtique d’Aristote, il y en a encore une dont Horace fait mention, à laquelle toutes les autres regles doivent s’assujettir, comme à la plus essentiel-le, qui est la bien-seance. Sans elle les autres regles de la Poësie sont sausses: parce qu’elle est le sondement le plussolide de cette vray-semblance, qui est si essentielle a certart. Car ce n’est que par la bien-seance que la vray-semblance a son effet: tout devient vray-semblance, dés que la bien-seance garde son caractere dans toutes ses circonstances. (Rapin, \textit{Reflexions} 69)
\end{quote}

[Besides all the rules taken from Aristotle, there remains one mentioned by Horace, to which all the other rules must be subject, as to the most essential, which is the decorum, without which the other rules of poetry

are false, it being the most solid foundation of that probability so essential
to this art, because it is only by the decorum that this probability gains its
effect; all becomes probable where the decorum is strictly preserved in all
circumstances. (Rapin, “Reflections” 266]

Also, unlike the marked division that England felt over the Italian theatrical precepts,
France embraced the theories, “As the vogue of the theater increased, they not only
borrowed plots wholesale, but imported from Italy the pseudo-classical rules for tragedy.
The idea of logical procedure, order, and a fixed design, so congenial to the French mind,
laid its stranglehold upon the drama” (Bellinger 169).

Charles de Saint-Évremond believed that the reason the ancients were being
revived was because there were few good modern examples: “On n’a jamais vu tant de
règles pour faire de belles Tragédies; & on en fait si peu, qu’on est obligé de représenter
toutes les vieilles” (Saint-Évremond, Oeuvres 297) [“There never were so many rules to
write a good tragedy by, yet so few good ones are now made that the players are obliged
to revive and act all the old ones” (Saint-Évremond, “Of Ancient” 271)]. Though this
movement technically begins in the middle of the sixteenth century, progression was
slow and the emerging plays were imitations of the classics. Tragedians also had to
contend with the popularity of the farce and its hold on audiences. Thus, it took over
fifty years for dramatists to develop definitive guidelines for how a playwright should
approach tragedy.

French playwrights were, for the most part, expected to adhere to Aristotelean
ideas (which were sometimes misinterpreted) coupled with Italian ideals because “the
academic critics sensitive to Italianate theatrical innovations promoted classical regularity and order, as set forth by Italian scholars, and they therefore sought to promote a classically correct French theatre that would rival if not surpass the glories of Greece and Rome” (Dukore 207). The French desired an instructive element in their tragedies (Dukore 208), but there were two rules that theorists seem to be most critical about: 1) the events must be probable (i.e. believably able to happen in real life), and 2) the three unities of time (the span was a little flexible), place (usually just one), and action (a single main action) must be present:

Ce n’est que par ces regles, qu’on peut établir la vray-semblance dans la fiction, qui est l’ame de la Poësie: car s’il n’y a point d’unité de lieu, de temps, & d’action dans les grands Poèmes, il n’y a point de vray-semblance. Enfin c’est par ces regles que tout devient juste, proportionné, naturel: car elles sont fondées sur le bon sens & sur la raison, plus que sur l’autorité & sur l’exemple. (Rapin, Reflexions 18)

[‘Tis only by these rules that the verisimility in fictions is maintained, which is the soul of poesy, for unless there be the unity of place, of time, and of the action in the great poems, there can be no verisimility. In fine, ‘tis by these rules that all becomes just, proportionate, and natural, for they are founded upon good sense and sound reason rather than on authority and example. (Rapin, Reflections 265)]

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12 See Rapin, “Reflections” 267.
The rules seem fairly straightforward but they could be quite restrictive when put into practice.

The first true test of these ideals was Pierre Corneille’s *Le Cid* in 1637. Corneille was both a playwright and a theorist. Though he later sought to uphold the rigorous demands of the Unities, he was able to see where they were a skewed version of Aristotle’s ideas (for example, that Aristotle was not really calling for a unity of place). For example:

> Le but du poëte est de plaire selon les règles de son art. Pour plaire, il a besoin quelquefois de rehausser l’éclat des belles actions et d’exténuier l’horreur des funestes. Ce sont des nécessités d’embellissement où il peut bien choquer la vraisemblance particulière par quelque altération de l’histoire, mais non pas se dispenser de la générale, que rarement, et pour des choses qui soient de la dernière beauté, et si brillantes, qu’elles éblouissent. (Corneille, Oeuvres)

[The end of the poet is to please according to the rules of his art. In order to please, he sometimes needs to heighten the brilliance of beautiful actions and to extenuate the horror of fatal ones. These are some necessities of embellishment with which he may greatly shock particular probability by some alteration of history but not so as to exempt himself from general probability except rarely, and for things that may be of utmost beauty and so brilliant that they dazzle. (“Discourses” 233)]
He was very much inspired by the Spanish legend of El Cid and his play equals many of Shakespeare’s works in psychological complexity. However, the piece does not follow a strict adherence to the unities and thus “La Querelle du Cid,” a debate over the play and what tragedy should be, soon followed.

The most obvious beginning of this argument comes from Georges de Scudéry’s *Observations sur Le Cid* (1637):

que le sujet n'en vaut rien du tout,

qu'il choque les principales regles du poeme dramatique,

qu'il manque de jugement en sa conduite,

qu'il a beaucoup de meschans vers,

que presque tout ce qu'il a de beautez sont derrobes, (Scudéry, *Observations*)

[That the plot is worthless;  
That it abuses the basic rules of dramatic poetry;  
That it pursues an erratic course;  
That much of its verse is poor;  
That virtually all its beauties are stolen. (Scudéry, “Observations” 212)]

Scudéry felt that the plot of *Le Cid* was crystal clear from the beginning, which made it seem to lack creativity. Because it was so transparent, there was no room for any kind of dramatic suspense. The play also lacked plausibility. For example, Scudéry did not believe that Chimène would consent to marry the man who murdered her father and thus
allow herself to become a kind of parricide by association:

The marriage of a woman to one at whose hands her father had met his
death, albeit in an honorable duel, must have been deemed a repulsive
incident; and the dramatist, instead of softening the repulsiveness by
spreading the action over a number of years, in which the healing
influence of time might have been exercised, had thought fit to construct
the piece in compliance with the twenty-four-hour rule. In the space of
one day, therefore, Chimène rises to the full consciousness of her
attachment to Rodrigue, discovers that he has shed her father’s blood,
passionately exhorts the king to punish him with death, and then consents
to accept his hand in marriage. (Bates 56)

Scudéry also believed that plays should adhere to the unity of time, but *Le Cid* went
overboard by trying to cram too many events into a twenty-four hour period. Too many
events made the play implausible. So, while on the one hand Scudéry would applaud
Pierre Corneille for trying to adhere to this rule, he could not because in his eyes the other
criteria had not been met. Finally, Scudéry believed that there should be more good
characters than bad characters and thus more virtues than vices. More positive elements
would allow for good to triumph over evil and thus allow for a solid moral principle. For
Scudéry, *Le Cid* did not follow this idea.

Corneille was understandably upset by Scudéry’s criticism and his heated
response marked the beginning of “La Querelle du Cid”. The argument came to the
attention of the French Academy (Académie Française) that had been established in 1635
by Cardinal Richelieu. The Academy called for an adherence to Aristotle’s rules, especially concerning plot, character, *dianoia* (thought), and language. Richelieu urged one of the members, Jean Chapelain, to write a criticism of *Le Cid* based upon these ideals, though it was tailored by Richelieu to suit his own opinions as well. “That the *Sentimens* is essentially the work of Chapelain seems sure; he was a man of integrity, and he himself declares that the ‘whole idea’ and ‘all the reasoning’ are his. Possibly some allowance must be made for Chapelain’s ‘absolute deference’ and ‘blind obedience’ to the Cardinal’s wishes [. . .]” (Clark 124). However, Chapelain admired Corneille’s work and he managed to keep the *Sentimens* from being a complete denunciation of the “irregular” play (Clark 124).

Chapelain partially agreed with Scudéry’s viewpoint, though he was also criticized for not properly supporting his claims. Chapelain’s main point of agreement was that *Le Cid* had problems with probability: “En quoy nous estimons qu’ils n’ont pas assés consideré quel estoit le sens d’Aristote lequel sans doute p’ar ce mot de Fable n’a point entendu ce qui necessairement devoit estre fableux mais seulement ce qu’il n’importoit pas qui fust vray pourveu qu’il fust vrayssemblance” (Collas and Chapelain 25) [“On this score, we judge them not to have sufficiently pondered Aristotle’s meaning; he undoubtedly used the word to suggest not that the plot had to be mythical, but only that it had to be plausible” (Académie, “Opinions” 223)]. He claimed that Aristotle recognized two kinds of plausibility, the usual and the extraordinary:

[. . .] le premier le commun qui comprend les choses qui arrivent ordinairement aux hommes selon leurs conditions, leurs aages, leurs moeurs wt leurs passions [. . .] le second l’extraordinaire qui embrasse les
choses qui arrivent rarement et outre la vraisemblance ordinaire, comme qu’un habile et meschant soit trompé, qu’un Tiran puissant soit surmonté; dans lequel extraordinaire entrent tous les accidens qui surprennent et qu’on nomme de la Fortune, pourveu qu’ils soient produits par un enchaisnement de choses qui arrivent d’ordinaire. (Collas and Chapelain 15)

[The usual embraces what normally happens to human beings according to their station, age, habits, and temperament [. . .]. The extraordinary embraces what rarely happens, what is outside the realm of the predictable, as when a clever scoundrel is tricked, when a strong man is beaten. Included are those incidents that we usually attribute to luck provided they result from a sequence of ordinary events. (Académie, “Opinions” 221)]

So, as long as something is likely to truly occur in real life it is fine for it to be shown on stage. Plus, it is easier to forgive a playwright for implausible events if they are based on historical fact. But if something in history is not probable, it is best to ignore it or at least change it to suit society:

[. . .] s’il est obligé de prendre une matiere historique de cette nature pour la porter sur le theatre, qu’il la doit reduire aux termes de la bienseance mesure au despens de la verité. C’est alors qu’il la doit plustost changer toute entiere que de lui laisser une seule tache incompatible avec les regles de son Art, lequel cherche l’universel des choses et les epure des
defaux et des irregularités particulières que l’histoire par la sévérité de ses loix est contrainte d’y souffrir. (Collas and Chapelain 22-23)

[If he must use historical material, he ought to make it, even at the expense of the truth, compatible with decorum, and he should rather change it completely than leave a trace of anything unconformable to the rules of art, which, addressing itself to universal concepts, purifies reality of the defects and of the individual irregularities with which rigid laws of history compel the latter to bear. (Académie, “Opinions” 223)]

However, “not all actual occurrences are suitable for the theatre” (Académie, “Opinions” 222-23) because “there are some truths that are monstrous or that we must suppress for the good of society” (223). Richelieu and the Académie sought to control the kind of material that was portrayed because showing certain things (like the wicked man completely getting away with his crimes) could create a chance that someone would be influenced into trying the same thing in real life.13

Outside of the Académie, other theorists, like François Hédelin, Abbé d’Aubignac, took up the debate on what tragedy should be and furthered the discussion on Aristotle and the unities. D’Aubignac:

[. . .] touched the life of his time at many and diverse points. A recognized arbiter of taste, a scholar, an author, a Précieux, a man of the world, and an abbé, he was for many years regarded as one of the foremost men of his age. Even after his death his opinions were respected by such men as

13 See Chapelain 126.
Corneille and Racine. His principal title to fame rests on the famous 

*Pratique du théâtre* (1657), which was studied by many practicing 
dramatists. Racine’s copy of the book is still in existence [...]. (Clark 128)

The *Pratique* was important because it was written especially for use by dramatists as a kind of textbook and was also notable because d’Aubignac, like Aristotle and Castelvetro, espoused the ideas that plays should be seen and not just read in order to be fully appreciated (Clark 128). “Il leur faut une instruction bien plus grossiere. La raison ne les peut vaincre, que par des moiens qui tombent sous les sens. Tels que sont les belles réprésentations de Theatre que l'on peut nommer veritablement l'Ecole du Peuple” (Aubignac, *Pratique* 5) [“They must therefore be instructed by a more sensible way, which may fall more under their senses, and such are the representations of the stage, which may therefore properly be called the People’s School” (Aubignac, “Whole” 238)].

It is also a very good illustration of the general viewpoints held by the majority of dramatic theorists at the time.14

D’Aubignac agreed with the Académie that the ancient theories should be followed because: 1) they are based upon reason and 2) the ancients had a lot of practice at making the theatre perfect. They did not always succeed in doing these two things, but, so long as what they managed to accomplished followed reason, then playwrights should feel free to mimic them. It was assumed that the only reason such plays would fail on stage was because they either had bad translations or the subject matter was not

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14 See Clark 128.
something that would concern the current audience. If playwrights have plays that do not follow the rules, but are considered “successful,” it is only because there may have been some parts that were worthy to be saved. So, instead of throwing out the whole thing, the play itself remained acceptable. This does not mean that the playwrights were good, just that their work was tolerable.

As for the unities, d’Aubignac made a very solid argument for the unity of action when he said, “Il est certain que le Theatre n'est rien qu'une Image, et partant comme il est impossible de faire une seule image accomplie de deux originaux differens, il est impossible que deux Actions (j'entens principales) soient representees raisonnablement par une seule Piéce de Theatre” (Aubignac, Pratique 72) [“’Tis certain that the stage is but a picture or image of human life, and as a picture cannot show us at the same time two originals and be an accomplished picture, it is likewise impossible that two actions (I mean principal ones) should be represented reasonably in one play” (Aubignac, “Whole” 241)]. In other words, a painter can only really represent one action and place at a time (though he can place a secondary set off to the side). Theatre should adhere to this practice as well. To do more would be too confusing for the audience and thus it would not be practical. If the playwright chooses well, the single event will be able to also fill in the rest of the story. Unlike most other theorists, d’Aubignac acknowledged that Aristotle did not specifically set forth this rule, but that it was implied. He assumed that it was such a common theatre practice that Aristotle did not need to expound upon it.15

As for the unity of space, d’Aubignac did not agree with Corneille that one scene

15 See Aubignac 243.
can represent two separate places. He felt that wherever the play starts, it should also end there: “[. . .] si souvent à leurs Acteurs d'ou ils viennent et où ils sont, que ce Philosophe eût supposé trop d'ignorance en celui qui les eût lus, s'il se fût amusé d'en faire une règle” (Aubignac, *Pratique* 87) [“[. . .] To make his actors appear in different places would render his play ridiculous by the want of probability, which is to be the foundation of it” (Aubignac, “Whole” 243)]. However, he did admit that it is possible to cheat this rule a little so long as the change makes sense and stays within the realm of what is possibly located near the original scene.

For the final unity, d’Aubignac believed that the actual time for the performance of a play is too short a time to expect that all of what must be covered can be. Therefore, the playwright must utilize the idea of a longer time frame. D’Aubignac thought that a twelve-hour representation is more than enough time to properly allow the action to take place in because it is realistic. He argued that since the action of the play is supposed to be continuous, most actions that would take place at night would be meaningless to the plot and thus would cause it to be disjointed if the action were allowed to be portrayed beyond (after) it.

After Corneille’s popularity began to wane and “La Querelle du Cid” had subsided, Jean Racine’s works came to the fore. Like Corneille, “Racine [. . .] also explored theoretical questions that were the common concern of seventeenth-century neoclassicists: for instance, the nature of the tragic hero, condensation and simplicity of design, and the purpose of tragedy” (Dukore 208).
As was mentioned before, Racine had read d’Aubignac, but he was also greatly influenced by his friendship with his contemporary, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux. Boileau’s *L’Art Poétique* (1674) became a very popular text and even had some influence in England (most notably through John Dryden who translated the work). Boileau’s “main idea was that the models of the ancients should be used to restrain the too exuberant outpourings of undisciplined talent” (Bellinger 175):

Que dans tous vos discours la passion émue

Aille chercher le coeur, l’échauffe et le remue,

Le secret est d’abord de plaire et de toucher,

Inventez des ressorts qui puissent m’attacher,

Que dès les premiers vers l’action préparée,

Sans peine de sujet m’aplatisse l’entrée. (Chant II 15-16, 25-28)

[In all you write observe with care and art

To move the passions and incline the heart,

The secret is, attention first to gain,

To move our minds and then to entertain,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{It should be noted that this work would not have specifically influenced Racine as it was published after most of his plays had been written.}\]
That, from the very opening of the scenes,

The first may show us what the author means. (Boileau, “Art of Poetry” 259)

So, the ancient rules should be seen as a means of training writers. One area this would help curb would be the fantastic because it is good to choose normal topics. Fanciful ones are excessive.

Boileau did not want to see French writers end up imitating the Italians whom he saw as overindulgent in their art. So, they should “Aimez donc la raison: que toujours vos écrits / Empruntent d’elle seule et leur lustre et leur prix” (Chant I 37-38) [Love reason then; and let whate’er you write / Borrow from her its beauty, force, and light (“Art of Poetry” 256)]. Boileau called for simple descriptions. He saw no need for minute detail in a scene. He also wanted writers to avoid low comedy (“burlesque”), “Quoi que vous écriviez, évitez la bassesse; / Le style le moins noble a pourtant sa noblesse” (Chant I 79-80) [In all you write be neither low nor vile; / The meanest theme may have a proper style (“Art of Poetry” 257)]. Instead they should “[...] Soyez simple avec art, / Sublime sans orgueil, agréable sans fard” (I, 101-102) [Be grave without constraint, / Great without pride, and love without paint” (“Art of Poetry” 257)]. Along with this, writers should work in a fluid, flowing, and pleasing style, “Sans la langue, en un mot, l’auteur le plus divin / Est toujours, quoi qu’il fasse, un méchant écrivain” (Chant I 161-62) [In short, without pure language, what you write / Can never yield us profit or delight (258)]. A writer should always keep to the point, “Que jamais de sujet le discours s’écartant, / N’aillle chercher trop loin quelque mot éclatant” (Chant I 181-82) [Keep your
subject close in all you say, / Nor for a sounding sentence ever stray (258)). Doing all of this will help the playwright to gain the audience’s attention from the very start of the play as well as help to keep them entertained throughout.

Boileau also dove more into the idea of character than the others that I have mentioned. For example, playwrights should not change who a known character is. If a character is known for a certain trait or habit, it should not be changed, but other attributes can be added. Thus some creativity can be taken when creating a character so long as the attributes do not massively conflict with his core persona.

In the end it all comes back to a desire to have verisimilitude and, despite wanting strict adherence to the three unities and Aristotle, French playwrights managed to give their characters more of a sense of reality than the ancients. In both cases the characters were realistic, but the French managed to make them more approachable through the language and action. Even though some of the subjects were the same, what could simply have been staid reimagined productions were instead vibrant, and somehow fresh, performances because the French sought to make them more approachable for the audience. Modernizing helped the playwrights keep their versions from being simple dull renderings of ancient texts:

On ne trouve pas les mêmes inconvénients dans nos représentations, que dans celles de l’antiquité; puisque notre crainte ne va jamais à cette superstitieuse terreur, qui produisit de si méchants effets pour le courage. Notre crainte n’est le plus souvent qu’une agréable inquiétude qui subsiste dans la suspension des esprits [. . .]. (Saint-Évremond, Oeuvres 306)
Our theatrical representations are not subject to the same inconveniences as those of the ancients were, since our fear never goes so far as to raise this superstitious terror which produced such ill effects upon valor. Our fear, generally speaking, is nothing else but an agreeable uneasiness which consists in the suspension of our minds. (Saint-Évremond, “Of Ancient” 274)

In doing so, they also managed to show how well adherence to the rules could work despite the inherent restrictiveness.

**General Trauma Theory**

There is always some concern when applying a “modern” theory to a work that is far older. Differences of world view and life experiences are called into question. However, psychology itself is not a new theory. Its early manifestations can be found under the guises of philosophy and theology. Betrayal itself is by no means a new concept either. Everyone experiences it and perpetrates it in one sense or another. Whether a person betrays someone on purpose or not is irrelevant, but it does inevitably happen in some form. No two people will respond exactly the same way to a betrayal, and this has a lot to do with how well they are able to cope with the trauma because of past experiences, severity of the incident, external problems, other psychological disorders, etc. Though there are many psychological theories that have been and can be applied to the various characters in the plays that I have chosen, I am most interested in how trauma affects them.
The study of psychological trauma as we now know it has its origins in the studies of Pierre Janet (1859-1947) in France. He was one of the first to see a correlation between what had been termed “hysteria” in women and various childhood traumas (DePrince 2). In Vienna, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Joseph Breuer (1842-1925) were also coming to the same conclusion. Both agreed that “unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events produced an altered state of consciousness, which in turn induced the hysterical symptoms” (Herman 12). The main difference in their separate works came in their terminology: “Janet called this alteration in consciousness ‘dissociation.’ Breuer and Freud called it ‘double consciousness’ (Herman 12). For Janet, these memories were “subconscious fixed ideas” (idées fixes) while for Freud and Breuer these memories were “reminiscences” (Herman 12). While Freud is better known, it is actually to Janet, and not Freud, that much of modern trauma theory owes its terminology and broad focus.17

Janet believed that “The traumatic memory [...] plays an important part in a certain number of neuroses and psychoses” (Janet 670). Thus it is at the core of many problems. A person who has never shown a sign of any disorders may suddenly find himself exhibiting symptoms. For example, “A depression which seems accidental, which is not related to the subject’s condition from youth upwards, and which does not depend upon an obvious change in his health, may be related to a memory of this kind” (Janet 670). When no other explanation presents itself, the root of the problem can often be traced back to some defining event (or series of events).

17 See DePrince 2-3.
Janet believed that:

The psychological study of traumatic memories enables us to devise a more rational method of treatment. The memory has only become traumatic because of the reaction to the happening has been badly effected. Either because of a depression already induced by other causes, or else because of a depression induced then and there by the emotion aroused by the incident, the subject has been unable to achieve, or has but partially achieved, the assimilation which is the internal adaptation of the individuality of the event. (678-79)

Taking it from a literary point of view, tragic characters are influenced by such memories and experiences. As with people in real life, these things affect the characters in very pronounced and varying ways. Understanding the events and how they transform the characters can lead to a better understanding of why they feel compelled to perform certain actions.

Janet found that traumatic memories were very hard to circumvent because they are so deeply rooted in a person’s psyche. He realized that the process of recovery would be a long one though it was possible to be “cured.” The reason for this difficulty is two-fold. The first part is because “according to the prevailing viewpoint in cognitive science, we have in place many separate mental modules, or cognitive mechanisms [. . .] capable of processing incoming information in parallel and organized into even larger mental processing clusters. [. . .] Often, different modules process the same event in
different ways” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 90). The other reason traumatic experiences are hard to overcome is because:

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke responses of catastrophe. (Herman 33)

Some people seem quite able to bounce back quickly from a traumatic event while others take years. It is difficult to predict which will be the case because there are too many factors that influence how a person processes such an event. "As psychoanalysis developed, trauma was regarded as the cause of various symptoms, conflicts, fixations, character traits, defenses, and adaptive and maladaptive cognitive and affective developments" (Horowitz Stress Response 20). For my analysis, the best way to approach an understanding of the effects of trauma is by looking at two trauma-based theories: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (for general theory terminology and analysis) and Betrayal Trauma (for specific relationship analysis).

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

“Posttraumatic literally means ‘after injury,’ and in PTSD the prolonged stress-response patterns constitute a dynamic syndrome of symptoms and behavioral dispositions. It may include changes in personality [. . .] and cognitive processing,
memory, perception, motivation, and interpersonal relations” (Wilson 15). According to the 4th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, PTSD is:

[... ] the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.

(American Psychiatric Association 463)\(^{18}\)

There is a long list of events that are considered traumatic. Perception is key to whether an event could be considered traumatic and that lies solely with the witness or participant of the trauma (Herman 58). One reason this theory can be easily applied to tragedy is that “The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (American Psychiatric Association 463). This definition is very similar to the idea of what Aristotle wanted the audience to achieve so that they could have a catharsis and learn from what was on stage. This is not to say that witnessing trauma on stage will cause the audience to experience PTSD, as there is no direct threat to them or to someone they know, but to show that such psychological repercussions have been understood since the ancient world.

There are many symptoms that are associated with the disorder. For example:

\(^{18}\) See DePrince 3.
Five interrelated symptoms define DSM-IV-TR PTSD D criteria of ‘persistent symptoms of increased arousal’ that were not present before the trauma. These symptoms reflect psychobiological changes in allostasis, hyperarousal of the adrenergic response system, and their behavioral expressions as PTSD symptoms:

1) Sleep cycle disturbances
2) Anger, irritability, and hostility
3) Impairment in cognitive processing of information
4) Hypervigilance: excessive alertness to threat and danger and readiness to respond
5) Abnormal startle response (Wilson 26-30)

However, the roots of PTSD study can be traced back to Janet’s theory of dissociation, which is a main criteria for someone to have in order be diagnosed with this disorder: “[. . .] most authorities conceptualize dissociative reactions occurring in the context of acute trauma as an adaptive process that protects the individual and allows him to continue to function, though often in an automaton-like manner” (Putnam 417).

While the American Psychological Association (APA) categorizes PTSD as an anxiety disorder (for example, as an Acute Stress Disorder) rather than a dissociative one, the APA does emphasize the crossover:

ASD differs from PTSD as a diagnostic entity in several ways relevant to clinical assessments. First, its duration is shorter and does not have the PTSD subtype specifiers of delayed onset, chronic or acute (i.e.,
symptoms less than 3 months). Second, to be diagnosed with ASD, a person needs to manifest only one symptom from each cluster of the core PTSD triad: (1) reexperiencing, (2) avoidance and numbing, or (3) hyperarousal. Third, ASD, unlike PTSD, has a separate diagnostic category for dissociative symptoms. In the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), the ‘B’ criteria for ASD states ‘either while experiencing or after experiencing the distressing event, the individual has three (or more) of the following dissociative symptoms,’ which include: ‘(1) a subjective sense of numbing, detachment, or absence of emotional responsiveness; (2) a reduction in awareness of his or her surroundings (e.g. ‘Being in a daze’); (3) derealization; (4) depersonalization; and (5) dissociative amnesia’ [. . .] . (Wilson 30)

Many psychological disorders fall under more than one category because symptoms overlap:

The diagnostic manuals also include sections on ‘associated features,’ which are narrative descriptions of other symptoms or behaviors that appear with the stress disorder but that may not be sufficient or necessary in themselves to constitute a prime characteristic of the syndrome for diagnostic purposes. The diagnostic criteria for each of the core triad of PTSD symptoms also share some of the same symptoms and features from other disorders, for example, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and specific personality disorders, such as borderline personality disorder and paranoid personality disorder. (Wilson 18)
Hence a character could seem to be portraying symptoms of several psychological disorders at once, leaving a diagnosis open to multiple interpretations. There is enough of a pattern within each of the following tragedies to argue for the characters’ behaviors being linked to trauma induced reactions.

Dissociation is “a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception” (American Psychological Association 519). Dissociation can be short-lived during the initial traumatic onslaught or it can recur repeatedly over time:

Dissociative reactions and disorders occurring acutely in the context of immediate trauma are typically short-lived and often resolve spontaneously [. . .]. There may, however, be subsequent dissociative symptoms such as flashbacks and abreactions\(^{19}\) that periodically reoccur causing significant distress years after the trauma [. . .]. In some individuals, particularly those suffering from sustained repetitive trauma, a chronic dissociative disorder such as depersonalization syndrome or multiple personality disorder develops. In such cases, the initially adaptive role of dissociation in blunting the impact of the traumatic experience becomes a maladaptive process that seriously interferes with the functioning of the individual [. . .]. (Putnam 418)

\(^{19}\) See Schimelpfening for clarification.
The characters in the plays that I have chosen exhibit either temporary or chronic dissociation. Some of them also have other psychological disorders, but the main cause is some kind of trauma (either singular event or recurring).

Some of the characters in the plays examined could be said to suffer from PTSD because they obviously internalize certain events too deeply to escape them easily. In theatre, soliloquies do especially well in showing us the inner workings of the characters’ minds and how they are trying to cope with the events surrounding them as well as past events:

Context-dependent memory, and mood-congruency effects, have been interpreted in terms of associative links with affective states – that is, the internal state provides associative links to stored information. An alternative view is that mood states regulate dominance of cognitive modules and thus the dominance of certain memory stores. (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 105-106)

Certainly some of the following PTSD symptoms can easily be attributed to the characters:

1) Intrusive distressing recollections of trauma (Images, Thoughts, Perceptions)

2) Dreams associated with trauma (Images, Thoughts, Perceptions)

3) Response predisposition: Acting or feeling “As if” (Reliving, Illusions, Trauma-rooted Hallucinations, Dissociative Processes)
4) Increased psychological distress on exposure to trauma-related stimuli
   (Anxiety, fear, sadness, terror, or other negative affects)

5) Increased physiological reactivity on exposure to trauma-related
   stimuli (Somatic manifestations of hyperarousal states evoked by trauma
   relevant cues) (Wilson 23)

There are several other criteria clusters, but this one is a good summation of the varying
kinds of reactions and events that are looked at when diagnosing someone suffering a
psychological disorder due to trauma. In the plays that I will be analyzing, the trauma is
predominantly brought on by acts of betrayal.

**Betrayal Trauma Theory**

As I said in the introduction, I believe that betrayal is the crux of what makes
these plays so fascinating and timeless. Betrayal drives the characters into reacting in
various ways because they each respond to this type of trauma in a unique fashion. I am
particularly interested in its effects both on the characters’ interpersonal relationships and
on those traumas caused by a character’s inner circle. Unless a person has become a
hermit, there is nothing that happens to one person that does not affect someone else in
some way because “The damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma, as
originally thought. Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological
structures of the self, but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link
individual and community” (Herman 50). Our sense of self is enmeshed in our view of
how others see us and how we see ourselves in relation to them. When something
traumatic happens, we can be pushed away from this connectivity. Therefore, we need the help of others to reestablish it:

Because traumatic life events invariably cause damage to relationships, people in the survivor’s social world have the power to influence the eventual outcome of the trauma. A supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while a hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome. In the aftermath of traumatic life events, survivors are highly vulnerable. Their sense of self has been shattered. That sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others. (Herman 61)

In each of the plays, the characters experience varying responses to their personal reactions of certain events. Some characters try to understand what has happened while others push the afflicted away (which, in turn, adds to the trauma).

The theory of betrayal trauma was first posited by Jennifer J. Freyd in the early 1990s. “In evaluating the underlying assumptions in the PTSD diagnosis, it is important to keep in mind that initial conceptualizations of the disorder were primarily based on male veterans’ experiences in a fairly circumscribed trauma (i.e., combat)” (DePrince 4). Freyd’s research concluded that trauma theory needed to be broadened to include incidences that “may not threaten death or physical injury, but can be damaging to well-being, relationships, self-concept, and beliefs about others and the world” (Freyd, Klest, and Allard 84). For her, a study of betrayal was the answer because “Betrayal is the violation of implicit or explicit trust. The closer and more necessary the relationship, the
greater the degree of betrayal. Extensive betrayal is traumatic. Much of what is traumatic to human beings involves some degree of betrayal” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 9). Studies on the affects of rape, for example, had been done for decades, but had only begun to scratch the surface as to why women suffered so much afterwards. Freyd made the natural leap to betrayal being a cause of the psychological distress because “most abuse traumas can be classified as betrayal traumas” (Freyd, Klest, and Allard 85). She then looked into other kinds of relationship trauma, namely childhood sexual abuse. This area is not relevant to my study here because there is no supporting evidence that any of the characters have experienced childhood sexual abuse, but Freyd’s betrayal theory in general is applicable since she does include other kinds of traumatic events in her research.

Another aspect of the theory that is interesting to note is that often we either forget the betrayal has occurred to us or push it away from our minds:

Betrayal trauma theory posits that under certain conditions, betrayals necessitate a “betrayal blindness” in which the betrayed person does not have conscious awareness, or memory, of the betrayal. A theory of psychological response to trauma, betrayal trauma builds the belief that the degree to which a trauma involves betrayal by another person significantly influences the traumatized individual’s cognitive encoding of the experience of trauma, the accessibility of the event to awareness, and

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20 See Herman 28-30.
the psychological as well as behavioral responses.  (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 9-10)

We forget in order to protect ourselves because “Detecting betrayal can be too dangerous when the natural changes in behavior it provokes would threaten primary dependent relationships.  In order to suppress the natural reaction to betrayal in such cases, information blockages in mental processing occur” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 129).  When others turn a blind eye to betrayal, they perpetuate it.  Just because it is done to maintain the natural order of things does not mean that it is any less harmful.  Yet society has always promoted such willful ignorance.  “Everyday betrayal blindness is all around us. It is the systematic filtering of reality in order to maintain human relationships.  It is the not knowing and not remembering the betrayals of everyday life and everyday relationships in order to protect those relationships.  It includes the white lies — and the darker lies — we tell ourselves so as not to threaten our bonds” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 193).  But that blindness can also cause a great many more problems later on if the mind has been traumatized by the betrayal(s) to such an extent that it cannot heal:

Although I propose that not knowing is ubiquitous, I also propose that knowledge is multi-stranded, and that we can at the same time not know and know about a betrayal.  Indeed, it is the human condition simultaneously to know and not to know about a given betrayal.  The knowing is often the kind of knowledge or memory that cognitive psychologists call “implicit knowledge” or “implicit memory.”  (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 4)
Though most of my analysis is on the betrayed/betrayer relationship, I thought it interesting to point out this aspect of the theory because there are moments in the plays where “betrayal blindness” is obvious.

In its broadest terms, “Betrayal traumas involve the depended-upon person or institution breaking an explicit or implied social agreement, such that a violation of trust occurs” (Freyd, Klest, and Allard 84). So, someone could be betrayed by a larger group as a whole (for example, the feelings that returning soldiers have about society and how they are treated after surviving combat). However, the more personal betrayals are the ones that can damage us the most because “The more the victim is dependent on the perpetrator — the more power the perpetrator has over the victim in a trusted and intimate relationship — the more the crime is one of betrayal” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 63). Parents are supposed to protect you from harm, other family members to help them with the task, and, once an adult, spouses and friends fill this role.

This system is set in place from the beginning because:

The belief in a meaningful world is formed in relation to others and begins in earliest life. Basic trust, acquired in the primary intimate relationship, is the foundation of faith. Later elaborations of the sense of law, justice, and fairness are developed in childhood in relationship to both caretakers and peers. More abstract questions of the order of the world, the individual’s place in the community, and the human place in the natural order are normal preoccupations of adolescence and adult development.
Resolution of these questions of meaning requires the engagement of the individual with the wider community. (Herman 54-55)

Such a system is universal and has been in place since the beginning of mankind and societies. However, traumatic experiences threaten this balance because they “shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith” (Herman 55). This crisis of faith is both internal and external because “Pain, including the pain of detecting betrayal, motivates changes in behavior to promote survival” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 129). These changes affect the betrayed, the betrayer, and society as a whole.

In the plays I have chosen, the characters show signs of both betrayal trauma symptoms and PTSD symptoms. This diagnosis fits because as:

Freyd (in press) noted that traumatic events involve differing degrees of fear and betrayal, depending on the context and characteristics of the event. Looking at a two dimensional model with fear on one axis and social betrayal on the other, the possibilities that trauma may involve mainly betrayal or fear, or a combination of both, extends the traditional assumptions in PTSD research that the fear is at the core of responses to trauma. (DePrince 24)

The characters experience fear from the situation and later, after the crisis is past and thoughts occur to them, a sense of betrayal emerges. “Because betrayal is qualitatively different from fear, traumas that include elements of betrayal may lead to different outcomes than traumas that are only fear-based” (Freyd, Klest, and Allard 85). This
duality has proven to be fairly typical in modern research because “The strong relationship between betrayal and fear likely reflects the complicated trauma histories participants reported that contained components of both life-threat and social betrayal” (DePrince 79) and “[. . .] those who met criteria for PTSD reported more fear at the time of the trauma, but more betrayal at present” (DePrince 82). Betrayal is a complex emotion so it is understandable that processing it could take a long time.

My chosen plays obviously do not take place over a long enough period of time for the characters to have a chance to properly overcome their traumatic experiences. Therein lies the core of why these stories are tragedies: they have no hope of being able to overcome such huge emotional obstacles in even the longest time frame (months) that is allotted to them. Even in the plays that ignore the Unity of Time, the characters are no sooner on the mend then another event unfolds to set them back to the psychological beginning. A few even have old wounds reopened by being forced to remember previous traumatic events (like Médée and Ariane) that they thought long past them. Because of the continued string of abuses, they take a mental beating that all but ensures a tragic end.
CHAPTER 3

MÉDÉE

Couples

*Médée*\(^{21}\) is the story of what can happen to a woman if she betrays her family to marry a man she does not know: betrayal and abandonment. If Médée were sweet and subservient, she might be at a loss as to how to react. But she has an aloof and self-assured demeanor. She also has power through her ability to wield sorcery. Yes, Médée is distraught by her situation and, when her trauma occurs, she does cringe. However, she rallies rather quickly and seeks action: vengeance.\(^{22}\) “The *Medea* is not about woman’s rights; it is about woman’s wrongs, those done to her and by her” (Knox 211) [Referencing Euripides]. She may waver at extreme moments, but she does not turn away from what she has to do. Médée has a strong sense of self preservation. She will continue on no matter what the cost and she will have her revenge.

Médée’s back story is very bloody. Her father, Aéetès of Colchis, possessed the golden fleece that Jason was sent on a quest to obtain (by his uncle, Pélias, who had

\(^{21}\)Modern audiences know the story mainly through Euripides. Most of my academic support refers more to the earlier play, though it could just as easily be talking about Corneille’s version. So, I will occasionally show how *Médée* parallels or deviates from its predecessor.

\(^{22}\)See Watt 205
usurped the throne from Jason’s father). Aëtès, of course, did not want to part with his possession, but promised that if Jason could complete a set of tasks he could have the fleece. The tasks would have been impossible to perform if Médée had not helped Jason with her sorcery. Aëtès never intended to part with the fleece, so Médée helped Jason steal it in exchange for his promise to marry her. As they were escaping, Médée killed her younger brother in an effort to delay their pursuers. This bloody deed both succeeded in its intentions and foreshadowed her ability to kill her own children later. Médée continued to use her wiles and her magic to help Jason successfully reach his homeland, Iolcos. Once there she killed Pélias, though she also did a good deed by healing Jason’s father. They fled Iolcos and ended up in Corinthe where they married and started a family. It could be argued that they are not truly wed because there is no formal ceremony, but “It is of little importance whether the affective tie was institutionalized or not; the essential psychological aspects of matrimony and cohabitation are the same, with the exception of a few subtle differences or complications characterizing each alternative” (Carotenuto 84). So, at the beginning of the play, Médée and Jason hold the status of husband and wife. This union adds a whole new layer to the betrayal and subsequent trauma.

In Euripides, the audience learns all of the back story from a direct address by the Nurse: “But now all’s enmity; the dearest ties of friendship / have grown sick. Jason’s betrayed his own sons and / my mistress, sleeping in a royal marriage-bed / with Kreon’s daughter [. . .]” (1.1.16-19). In his version, Pierre has Jason reveal all of this to his closest friend. By having Jason relay all of the information, Corneille is giving us Jason’s personality and character in a more direct manner. He has found a woman who is
“un objet plus beau,” a more beautiful woman (1.1.8). Unlike Thésée, Jason does not completely hide behind a claim of true love for the other woman as his reason for betrayal. Rather, he looks for love where it can do him the most good: “J'accommode ma flamme au bien de mes affaires; / Et sous quelque climat que me jette le sort, / Par maxime d'État je me fais cet effort” (1.1.30-32) [“I adapt my passion for the good of my affairs; / No matter where fate leads me, / I will make this union for the state’s greater good”]. If a romantic match will help him gain something that he wants, then he is not adverse to pursuing it. Jason admits that he chose Médée for the same reason (to gain the fleece) and is repeating it with Créuse because “Maintenant [. . .] un exil m’interdit ma patrie” (1.1.41) [“Now an exile separates me from my homeland”]. Jason was exiled from his homeland because of Médée’s murder of King Pélis. In a sense, Jason is using one woman to reclaim what another woman cost him: Créuse is the means by which he will regain his lost status.23

Pollux is a voice for reminding the hero that his actions are not honorable and he shows some sympathy for the rejected lover/wife. Pollux and Nérine essentially take the place of Euripides’s chorus. The best friend can do nothing to stop the impending catastrophe, but at least he puts the events in perspective and holds up a mirror wherein the hero can see his shame. “Shame, however, is a profoundly painful, self-focused emotion that typically motivates attempts to hide or escape from the situation, or alternatively, to retaliate against whoever has caused or even simply witnessed the shame in what Tangney (1995) called "externally-directed, humiliated fury" (p. 123)” (Fitness 88). Trying to get Jason to feel any sort of guilt backfires because he sees his actions as

23 See Simon 75.
justified in order to secure his future. The impending marriage may be a politically savvy move, but that does not wholly excuse the harm that Jason will be doing to Médée and his children because the other part of the plan is to send Médée away into exile.

Once Pollux has left the stage, Jason does admit to himself that he owes a debt to Médée, but he also owes Créon (1.2.165-72). Jason is very well aware that his treatment of Médée is criminal but there has obviously been some kind of miscommunication about the kind of relationship that they have. Médée thought that they were in what modern psychological theory terms a “communal relationship.” In communal relationships, the expectations are that partners will care about one another's welfare and will support and help each other without expecting immediate reward. Typically, marital and familial relationships are characterized as communal in orientation” (Fitness 76). Everything that she has done has been for him. Obviously, Médée was more emotionally invested in the relationship than Jason. He was looking for what he could get out of the marriage. He saw their marriage as a transactional or “exchange” relationship:

in exchange relationships the expectations are that partners are not responsible for one another's welfare and that benefits obtained from either partner should be promptly reciprocated. Typically, relationships between clients and service providers are characterized by exchange principles. (Fitness 76)

This is the same kind of relationship that he plans to have with Créuse as well. For Jason, “love” is merely a useful tool.24

24 See Wilkinson 77.
Jason justifies his betrayal by saying that his match with Créuse will prove advantageous for his children because “[. . .] as in most traditional societies, the institution of marriage was aimed primarily at strengthening families and producing legitimate offspring, rather than creating an intimate personal relationship between the spouses” (Blondell et al. 55). He also claims to love Créuse, but does not use the same terminology for Médée. She has simply been relegated to a regret. Jason does want to keep his children with him and plans to talk Créuse into the idea. “For him, marriage and children, indeed, all human ties, are only a means to an end. The value of life depends on social status and its perpetuation in generations to come. That is why children are important for him” (Schlesinger 307). He believes that Créuse is a kind person who will easily accept the children from his first marriage. Whether Jason is simply deluding himself or rationalizing his actions is secondary to the fact that he is betraying his wife in yet another way – he means to take the children away from her. In Euripides, it is Medea who begs Jason to allow the children to remain with him. By making it Jason’s own idea, Corneille is portraying him in even a harsher light and as less than sympathetic towards Médée’s situation.

Jason broaches the subject to Créuse. He tries to play upon her love for him and her empathy. Ironically, Jason is acting as though they will have a communal relationship, probably because he assumes that, like Médée, Créuse thinks that is what they have. However, Créuse is much more politically savvy than that. She recognizes that they are in an exchange relationship more than in a communal one.²⁵ Créuse replies that she has thought about Jason’s ties to his children, but wants Jason to grant her a favor

²⁵ See Clark and Mills for further explanation on these kinds of relationships.
in return because “je ne veux rien pour rien” (1.3.195) [“I want nothing for nothing”].
This is not a loving reply, but a cunning one. She plans to use the children as bargaining
chips to get what she wants. Créuse’s acquisitiveness makes Médée the more
sympathetic character at this point.

Médée finally takes the stage, alone, to give her side of the story in a scenic
monologue. Just as in Euripides’ version, the audience is predisposed to have some
sympathy for her: “Euripides starts his play by gaining sympathy for Medea, who is
represented in the prologue as a desperate women maltreated by a contemptible man”
(Blondell et al. 156). The Greek Medea’s opening monologue is a heartbroken lament.
However, the French Médée takes the stage like a fury, all bent upon vengeance. Médée
is all focused ire:

Like a creature out of another world, this wild woman whom Jason’s
outrage has kindled to unquenchable fury moves across the stage, till
Corinth rings with her lamentings and her rage; and one sees not so much
a woman as an elemental passion unconfined, fateful, winged with
destruction, dreadful to provoke. (Watt 206)

Médée calls upon the gods to be her witnesses (thus they become a kind of mute Chorus)
and to cast their blessings upon her plans:

Voyez de quel mépris vous traite son parjure,

Et m’aidez à venger cette commune injure:

..........................................................

26 See Hubert 42
La mort de ma rivale, et celle de son père;

Et si vous ne voulez mal servir mon courroux,

Quelque chose de pis pour mon perfide époux:

Qu'il coure vagabond de province en province,

Qu'il fasse lâchement la cour à chaque prince;

Banni de tous côtés, sans bien et sans appui, (1.4.205-06, 18-23)

[Notice the contempt with which he betrays you,

And help me be avenged of this shared injury.

........................................

The death of my rival, and that of her father;

And if you don’t wish to do a disservice to my wrath,

Something far worse for my faithless husband:

That he roams adrift from region to region,

That he fears to approach each prince’s court;

Banished from all, without property or support.]

Médée wants Jason to suffer the fate that he has accepted for her. It is not certain that Médée would be as abhorred and shunned in her exile as she wants Jason to be in her vision of the future, but:

Exile, especially in a tribal society like that of ancient Greece, is a terrible fate even for an independent man (as many passages in Greek texts attest), let alone for a single woman with young children [. . .] . Medea’s situation
thus takes the Greek woman’s lot to a nightmarish extreme. If she is the patriarchal male’s nightmare, Jason is the dependent woman’s. (Blondell et al. 158)

The only possible thing that could make Médée’s exile not turn into a nightmare is her ability to perform magic. Thus far, there has not been any indication that she can create a sustainable living environment for herself. In fact, it could very well be that her sorcery could actually cause her death more quickly because of societal fear over her powers if she uses them in an overt manner. Obviously Médée does not wish to do something so blatant or she would use her powers to torment Jason in another way. Hence the subterfuge because “[. . .] the fantasy must be vindicated through the punishment of the betrayer. If it can be proven that he is in the wrong, then the sacrifice will still be meaningful. The effort for intimacy was righteous, but the other person was unworthy of that righteous effort” (Wilkinson 115). Médée will certainly not have an easy life. She wants Jason to suffer as she has been made to suffer; as she knows that she will suffer in the future.

Médée wonders how they could all believe that she would do nothing against Jason just because she loves him. Bitterness has become rooted within her. She feels as though nothing could quell her rage: “Ma rage contre lui n'ait par où s'assouvir” (1.4.239) [“My rage against him can never be appeased”]. Jason has deceived himself if he thinks that Médée will meekly bow to what he wishes just because she loved and married him (1.4.241-48). Her past crimes will seem as nothing compared to what she plans for Jason: “Déchirer par morceaux l'enfant aux yeux du père / N'est que le moindre effet qui suivra ma colère” (1.4.249-50) [“Tearing the child to pieces before his father’s eyes /
Will be the least action to follow my wrath”]. She feels that her anger is just, and therefore Jason, Créon, and Créuse deserve whatever punishment she metes out (1.4.267-71). Médée’s rage has turned into a deep seated hatred for the three:

Another emotion that may be experienced in response to betrayal is hatred – an emotion about which psychologists know little but that is considered by lay people to be a powerful motivator of destructive and vengeful behaviors. [...] Fitness and Fletcher (1993) found that humiliation and appraisals of relative powerlessness were important elicitors of hatred for an offending spouse; thus it might be expected that hatred would be experienced in response to deeply humiliating betrayals involving deceit, severe loss of social status, and appraisals of powerlessness. (Fitness 82)

Médée is the perfect embodiment of William Congreve’s phrase: “Heav’n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn’d, / Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn’d” (The Mourning Bride, 3.1).

Corneille’s Médée does not have the benefit of a Chorus to repeatedly warn her about the perils of her plans for revenge. Instead, she must rely on her own abilities to reason and judge what actions are appropriate. Such a situation is highly problematic:

Van der Kolk and McFarlane (1996) suggest that people who can make meaning of their symptoms as appropriate responses to traumatic events are able to manage their symptoms. For those individuals whose symptoms are quite complicated, Van der Kolk and McFarlane (1996) suggest that they are not able to make meaning of their reactions and
therefore require intervention in order to manage the symptoms.

(DePrince 7)

Even though Médée understands the cause and effect of her wild emotions in this situation, she is not able to manage them on her own and they move her in a very dangerous direction (mainly for others, but also herself). Comprehension does not mean control.

Nérine does try to soothe Médée with some kind of rational thinking, but if an entire group could not sway Euripides’ Médée, one solitary figure could hardly hope to do so. Médée has come to believe that the only person she can trust is herself, that, alone, she can achieve more than she has done in the past and persevere. Such a belief shows a great amount of self-worth, but it also makes her foolhardy because when it would be prudent to remain quiet about her feelings, she instead proclaims them to all who will listen. Nérine warns her that Créon is powerful and not someone who should be taken lightly. All that is keeping him from turning Médée over to her enemies is a respect for Jason, but that is not something that she should count on, especially if she continues railing against everyone.

Créon uses Médée’s strong nature to foist all blame upon her for everything bad that has happened to Jason or has been attributed to his actions:

Ton Jason, pris à part, est trop homme de bien:

Le séparant de toi, sa défense est facile;

Jamais il n’a trahi son père ni sa ville;

Jamais sang innocent n’a fait rougir ses mains;
Jamais il n'a prêté son bras à tes desseins;

Son crime, s'il en a, c'est de t'avoir pour femme. (2.2.460-65)

[Your Jason, for his part, is too good a man:

Separated from you, his defense is easy;

Never has he betrayed his father or his city;

Never has the blood of innocents stained his hands;

Never has he lent his strength to your designs;

His crime, if one exists, is having you for a wife.]

What is interesting about this passage is the way that Créon twists the truth of what happened. “We might even get the impression that Jason is the tragic hero, while Medea, whose metabasis is a turn for the good, is lacking in true tragic stature. But such a view is undoubtedly false, for Medea is surely the tragic heroine” (Schlesinger 301).

Jason was a good man and still is from a certain point of view. No doubt he would never have betrayed his father or his city. He went on the quest and returned in good faith.

At the end of the passage (lines 464-65), Créon suggests that Jason had no foreknowledge of Médée’s various plans, that he was completely blind to what she was doing. It is possible that Jason may not have known that Médée was going to commit certain acts because:

In the heroic societies portrayed by Homer, aristocratic women are subordinate to men and perform separate work, but are often consulted by their husbands on important matters and seem to have far greater freedom [. . .]. Although these texts are not straightforwardly historical, they
suggest that in aristocratic society women exerted more influence, since
women were central to the family and the family was the basis of the
aristocratic clans’ power. (Blondell et al. 49)

Jason may have given Médée more freedom than the average woman because she was a princess and a sorceress but he could not have been wholly ignorant of various acts (like her plot to kill Pélias). If Jason knows about her actions then he is equally culpable. If he is ignorant of those actions, then he is weak. In either case, why would Créon want such a man for a son-in-law and in charge of his kingdom? The only way Jason could be acceptable to the kingdom is to blame Médée and her abilities for Jason’s position. Jason is thus purified through Médée’s guilt. Most of the citizens are willing to accept these claims as fact and persecute her. Is Médée innocent of the claims? No, but neither is Jason, though he seems to believe himself blameless. However, because Médée no longer holds any scio-political power (except what she has through Jason), and he has a high social standing by being a hero, she will bear the punishment alone. As she says, “Je n'en ai que la honte, il en a tout le fruit” (2.2.472) [I have nothing but the shame, he reaps all the fruit].

Créon delivers the final blow, “Laisse-nous tes enfants” (2.2.493) [“Leave your children with us”]. There is no gentle lead-in to this phrase. He does not couch it as a request or argue that it is best for the children, even though he does finish the sentence by saying, “[... ] je serais trop sévère, / Si je les punissais des crimes de leur mère” (2.2.493-94) [“[... ] I would be too severe / If I punish them for the crimes of their mother”]. He does make the mistake of saying that Créuse is the one who has requested it on behalf of Jason. This knowledge seals the fate of all three.
He also makes the mistake of giving her a day to get her things together and say goodbye. These are parallels that echo what happens in Euripides’ scene:

The king himself unconsciously provides her with the means of luring him into the trap. When Medea again bewails her lost homeland (328), Creon replies that next to his children he too loves his country most of all. The children motif reappears, but here its significance goes beyond mere effect on the audience. Medea uses Creon’s revelation in two ways. She comes to realize how much children mean to a man, and immediately exploits this, pointing out the distress of her own children in appealing to Creon’s paternal feelings. Thus he grants her a day’s grace, even though he knows too well that in doing so he is committing a grave error (350).

(Schlesinger 305)

It is little wonder that “Medea is determined to act; she has not merely thought of it, nor has she struggled to the decision. In a sense the revenge is imposed upon her by her own nature. She must will it of necessity, and this she knows very well” (Schlesinger 295). Créon’s words only serve to give her more justification.

The agent of Médée’s vengeance is given to her when she finds out what it is that Créuse wants in exchange for helping Jason keep his children: Créuse literally wants the clothes off of her rival’s back (2.4.568-72). In Euripides, Medea’s gives the dress in the guise of a peace offering. Jason does protest that she is giving up something far too valuable, but he does not stop her from actually sending the gifts. Corneille’s version makes Créuse much more culpable in her own demise and erases a good deal of
sympathy that a Euripidian audience might have had for her. She has coveted the gown since she first beheld it and does not pretend otherwise.

Jason knows that the gown is the only valuable possession that Médée took with her when they fled her father. The dress was originally a gift from her grandfather, Hélios, and is the last connection that she has left of her past and her family. Corneille instead focuses upon how beautiful the dress is and how much Créuse has come to lust after whatever Médée has. All she can see is her triumph over the other woman when “cette robe et Jason soient à moi” (2.4.592) [“this dress and Jason are mine”]. Despite the fact that this is a very vulgar request, and it will completely strip Médée of everything that she holds dear, Jason feels certain that Médée will give it up to save the children.

They have all underestimated Médée. On the one hand they brand her as barbaric and capable of horrendous crimes:

Jason points out that she was raised without the benefits of Greek ‘civilization’ [. . .] and later claims that no Greek woman would have behaved as she has done [. . .] . There is heavy dramatic irony here, since he has himself violated the Greek ethical norms of trust and honesty in his treatment of her [. . .]. (Blondell et al. 153)

Then on the other they dismiss her as ineffectual. They clearly do not understand the desperation that she feels from the traumas they continually inflict upon her: “Whether or not an act of betrayal involves lies, deception, or infidelity, one important aspect of the experience that intensifies its severity and painfulness is humiliation, or the perception that one has been shamed and treated with disrespect, especially in public (Gaylin, 1984; Metts, 1994)” (Fitness 79).
Médée is cornered, but that does not mean that she is defeated. She is a woman of deep passions and cunning. “Given that humiliation inflicts such a deep and painful injury to a person's self-esteem and social status, taking revenge might well be regarded as a powerful means of restoring dignity and regaining some control over the situation” (Fitness 86). She desires to destroy Jason, but in such a way that will make him suffer as much as she has:

She could have been queen, and who knows what else besides, in her own country; she gave it up for her marriage. And when that is taken away from her, the energy she had wasted on Jason was tempered to a deadly instrument to destroy him. It became a theos, relentless, merciless force, the unspeakable violence of the oppressed and betrayed, which, because it has been so long pent up, carries everything before it to destruction, even if it destroys also what it loves most. (Knox 292-93)

What does Jason care about? His reputation, his political contacts, and his lineage. Destroying the latter two will cripple the first. At the same time it will also destroy Médée in a way that she is incapable of seeing through the painful haze of her trauma.

Médée has little choice of vengeful actions and Jason provides her with the means by claiming that their sons are his reason for marrying Créuse (3.3.821-26). Jason tries to convince Médée that he is really sacrificing himself for the good of his children. He also expects her to believe that his debt to her for saving his life has been paid because this bargain also keeps Acaste from seeking her death. Jason ignores the fact that he is the original cause of this predicament and that Médée actually saved his life more than once.
Despite her anger, Médée admits, “Je t'aime encor, Jason, malgré ta lâcheté” (3.3.911) [“I still love you, Jason, despite your cowardice”]. She begs him to let her keep the children with her in exile (3.3.917-22). This plea could be a ploy to test Jason’s paternal feelings, but the words could also be taken as the cry of a bereft mother. Médée does love her children. At this point in the play, she still has not thought of using them against Jason in any way other than as a link to him. If she keeps them with her then she will have some control over the future of Jason’s lineage. This does not mean that her sentiments are false, but having custody of the children does give her some power over Jason.

Médée acquiesces when Jason insists again that he loves them too much to see them exiled and that all he is doing is for their sake (3.3.929-32). Jason is only too happy to accept these words at face value. He does not question why she has suddenly decided to submit to his plans. “Only a man incapable of repentance could be so fatally deceived by its counterfeit” (Vellacott 229). Jason is magnanimous in his acceptance of her sacrifice and promises always to remember how much she loves him. Of course, she does not want his warm remembrances.

Nérine begins to suspect the lengths that Médée will go to for her revenge. She tries to steer her mistress towards vengeance against Créuse alone. Médée does hold Créuse accountable, but her death will not be enough to satisfy Médée. So she adds to her plan the worst act that she can devise: “Since Jason has broken the male side of the marital bargain by abandoning her, she retaliates by breaking the female side through killing their children” (Blondell, et al. 161). Médée’s reasoning is quite sound from a logical point of view. “The most common form of revenge seems to come through
relationships. The intimate refuge is withdrawn and replaced by an intimate persecution. The custody of children, the goodwill of friends and family seem to be the areas in which most vengeful women operate” (Wilkinson 116). There are no friends or family to turn against Jason, so the only method of hurting him is through the children. “[.] Medea is a woman: no matter how great her gifts, her destiny is to marry, bear and raise children, go where her husband goes, subordinate her life to his. Husband, children, this is all she has; and when Jason betrays her, the full force of that intellect and energy, which has nowhere else to go, is turned against him” (Knox 292). Though Jason is aware that Médée is capable of horrific deeds, like fratricide, even he cannot foresee that she is capable of infanticide.

There does not seem to be a plan for what Médée will do after she has achieved her goals. It would seem logical that she would expect either to escape or be killed, but the focus seems to be on neither. She is extremely focused on the task of vengeance and that would seem to indicate an aversion to thinking about what comes after it – a time when she will have to face the ramifications of her actions. Avoidance is a common theme in trauma victims:

The mental activity used to prevent unwanted arousals of emotion is defensive in nature. Such defenses can be adaptive in that they prevent the danger of emotional flooding, but they can also be maladaptive because they prevent a full recognition of ideas and can blunt the possibilities for solutions to difficult problems. (Horowitz, Cognitive Psychodynamics 59)

It may not seem obvious in Médée’s case, but she is avoiding any thought of what she might feel later. She is keeping herself tuned up in a state of hyper-awareness and anger.
Only by doing this can she maintain a forward motion. Pausing could cause her to be overwhelmed with the weight of depression and hopelessness. Médée is a woman of action, and such a state would be fatal for her, but it also keeps her from finding a nonviolent option to her plight.

Unlike Euripides, Corneille shows Médée preparing the poison. The scene may take on magical aspects, but that does not mean that Medea is actually performing magic in the scene. How she prepares the poison would depend upon a directorial choice. “And in any case, in the play Euripides wrote, Medea has no magical powers at all. Until she is rescued by the god Helios, and is herself transformed into some kind of superhuman being, she is merely a helpless betrayed wife and mother with no protection of any kind. She has only two resources, cunning and poison” (Knox 285). But showing her preparing the potion lends the story a more mystical and malevolent tone. By delving into the supernatural, Corneille emphasizes Médée’s sense of being other, of being a foreigner separate from the rest of the characters. Her ways are different, and thus there is no way to predict her actions.

Despite this spectacle, the reality is that Médée is a woman suffering under the weight of losing everything she has. “She is apologetic, conciliatory, a foreigner who must carefully observe the proprieties. But her life, she says, has been destroyed; her husband, who was everything to her, has turned out to be the vilest of men” (Knox 288). The poisoned garment could be seen as a symbol of self destruction. After all, it is poisoned with more than just the physical elements. Médée’s anger, hate, and despair are just as embedded in the gown’s fibers. These are all she needs to ensure her vengeance, for the emotions cement her intent and desires.
Médée contemplates the necessity of killing her children in a monologue (5.2.1335-51). “[ . . .] Corneille’s heroine’s resolve does not begin to be a challenge for herself, a soul-struggle as H.C. Lancaster somewhat quaintly calls it, till his fifth act when, with Créon and Créuse dead, she sees the cost to herself in striking at Jason through his love for their children” (Knight 12). Médée knows that it is against the laws of nature for her to murder her own children. A mother’s duty is to protect her offspring. She acknowledges their innocence and confesses her love for them. Médée is far from an uncaring maternal figure:

Despite the conflicting feelings aroused by the fact that Jason is her children’s father [ . . .] Medea clearly embodies this affection [ . . .] . It is crucial to recognize that Euripides does not portray her as a cold or uncaring mother, but an intensely loving one, even after she has killed them [ . . .] . In this respect, as in her preoccupation with marriage, Medea is not the bloody, passionate, and transgressive barbarian sorceress of myth, but a stereotypical Greek woman. (Blondell et al. 155)

The same holds true for Corneille’s version. She has done her best for both Jason and her children, but it has been for naught. Yet still she hesitates because she does, after all, love the three of them. Even though Jason has been cruel, she still cares for him. Of course, she loves her children more, but if she gives in to her softer emotions then her revenge will be meaningless.

Her maternal side shies away from doing something so cruel, but her practical side acknowledges that killing the children is the surest way to hurt Jason (5.2.1349-57). Médée is caught in limbo between two actions that, no matter which one is taken, will
doom her in some aspect. Whether the choice to kill her children is some form of madness resulting from her turmoil is hard to determine since she seems so rational. Take away the horror of infanticide and her logic is sound, but add in the visceral response to such an act and it seems to be madness that drives her. Either way, she embraces these emotions and resolves to kill their children.

In nearly all of the versions of Medea, the children inevitably die either by accident (Medea failing to make them immortal) or by murder (a vengeful mob, Medea). The children are not meant to grow up and continue Jason’s bloodline. They are doomed never to have the chance at adulthood and all of the inherent problems that arise. Euripides, and Corneille, take the horror of this event a step further by having Medea slay her sons on purpose in order to make Jason suffer. Her own grief is secondary to what she knows Jason will feel at seeing his immortality slip away through the deaths of those he holds dear.

After Créon and Créuse are dead from the poisoned dress, Jason believes that Médée has committed the murders because she was going to lose their children. Jason is incapable of seeing his own culpability in the matter. He considers himself to have an “esprit fidèle” (a faithful soul, 5.5.1521). He does say this in relation to Créuse, but if he had felt that way with Médée, none of these horrible events would have happened. Ironically, Jason also expresses a desire to kill the children to punish them for being the bearers of the gift and to punish Médée:

Instruments des fureurs d'une mère insensée,

Indignes rejetons de mon amour passée,

Quel malheureux destin vous avait réservés
À porter le trépas à qui vous a sauvés ?

C'est vous, petits ingrats, que malgré la nature

Il me faut immoler dessus leur sépulture.

Que la sorcière en vous commence de souffrir:

Que son premier tourment soit de vous voir mourir.

Toutefois qu'ont-ils fait, qu'obéir à leur mère? (5.5.1529-37)

[Instruments of fury of an insane mother,

Unworthy offspring of my past love,

What unhappy fate was reserved for you

That you carried death to the one who had saved you?

I must go against nature, you little ingrates,

And sacrifice you over their graves.

The witch who birthed you begins to suffer:

Her first torment will be to see you die.

Oh but what did they do but obey their mother?]

He does realize that the children are innocent of their mother’s scheme, but he is grief stricken and not thinking clearly. It is doubtful that he would have killed them since they are all that remain of his chances for a continued. However, the fact that he even thinks of infanticide as a means of retribution suddenly makes Médée’s own thoughts on the idea seem almost normal. These are certainly not the first times that anyone has thought
to kill offspring to harm the parents, but desiring to end personal offspring takes on a whole other level.

Jason confronts Médée only to find that she has killed their children. She claims that she “t'a déjà vengé de ces petits ingrats” (5.6.1540) [“has already taken your revenge on these little ingrates”]. This line is interesting because Jason was alone when he declared that he would murder the children himself. This is either a bit of dramatic irony or Médée somehow knows what he has said. It does not matter, for Jason knows that he had thought the same thing if even only for a moment. So, the children’s death takes on even more weight. Jason is horrified and has even more reason to want to kill Médée, but he is helpless to do anything against her. She has literally taken the high ground by being on a balcony. From the onset of the scene she has held the position of power. Jason is and has always been beneath her, though she deigned to come down to his level while they were married. She has now reclaimed her superior position, but instead of saving Jason this time she will destroy him.

Médée’s vengeance complete, she soars off into the skies in her grandfather’s chariot, pulled by dragons. This bit of the fantastic may seem out of place and unbelievable because everything that has come before was reasonably realistic. However:

There had to be a final confrontation in which the contrast between the triumphant Medea, full of derision and scorn, exhibits the bodies of her children to completely annihilate Jason, thus creating a lasting impression for the audience. This can only be achieved if the heroine has unusual
means at her disposal, for without them she is helplessly exposed to the fury of her husband.  (Schlesinger 298)

Médée is a sorceress after all, and this final show of her power only serves to drive home to Jason just how bereft and powerless he truly is. Our last images of Médée are of a woman who has the world at her command, which is certainly the opposite of what we would expect from someone who has just lost her husband and her children. We do not get to witness the inevitable breakdown when she realizes that, like Jason, she truly has lost everything she holds dear. “The granddaughter of Helios may stand in triumph on her dragon-chariot, but Medea the woman is dead” (Schlesinger 310). She is just not aware of the severity of her changed state.

It is fitting that the final scene of the play is taken up with Jason lamenting, alone, all that has happened. Even in the end he does not admit the true role that he played in the events: a deceitful husband who betrays his faithful wife. Instead, he sees himself as a martyr who sacrificed himself for his family and who mistakenly saved the life of the woman who destroyed him. His one decisive action in the whole of the play is to kill himself at the end. His pain at having been betrayed in turn by the woman he deserted is too much for him to bear. Jason falls under the weight of his own trauma, while Médée continues on despite hers.
CHAPTER 4

HAMLET

Couples

It is hard to know completely the depth of Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship because it seems to be a side issue in the play. There have been varying theories throughout the years about the nature of their relationship. The theories have ranged from it being a passing fancy of both characters to a star-crossed-lovers tragedy. Most interpretations see Hamlet as fairly solid in his emotions for Ophelia – he is either merely fond of her (if he harbors any feelings at all) or he truly loves her as much as she seems to love him. Overall, there does seem to be true affection, and it is possible that the relationship is in the first throes of love. However, whether their love is in blush or bloom, their romantic connection does have some repercussions when it is broken. For Hamlet, the break just adds another level of stress and strain upon his already taxed psyche. For Ophelia, the repercussions run much deeper and prove tragic for her in a way that is incredibly pitiable.

Alexander Leggatt questions whether Hamlet is even capable of loving Ophelia. He believes that Hamlet cannot truly care for her because of his emotional confusion surrounding his feelings for his mother:
Hamlet’s own reading of Ophelia is an unstable mixture of idealism and disgust. The disgust is involved with his feelings about his mother, but his recoil from the female body is even sharper when he thinks of Ophelia, presumably because his sexual interest in her is more direct. His image of a pregnant Ophelia is the sun breeding maggots in a dead dog (II.i.181-86). Yet some of the disgust recoils on himself, since he is the one most likely to get her pregnant [. . .]. He is capable at times of setting his corruption against her purity. (72)

It is not uncommon for a man to be drawn to traits that are similar in both his mother and his romantic interests. However, when the mother-son relationship is complicated by Oedipal tendencies (among other problems), any romantic relationship that the son could hope to have is doomed before it can ever really begin.

It is true that Hamlet seems distraught over his mother’s marriage to his uncle. It could certainly seem to him that he has lost both parents to Claudius’ wiles – one through death and one through sex. This preoccupation with his family could certainly affect his relationship with others. If we go by Leggatt’s reasoning, Hamlet is so obsessed with his mother that he cannot possibly have any real emotions left over for Ophelia:

I have suggested that Hamlet cannot separate his concern with what Claudius did to his father’s body from his concern with what he does to his mother’s; and the latter concern is the more obsessive. It is perhaps for this reason that as the excitement of the revenge action mounts, so does Hamlet’s erotic excitement, sex and killing twisting together in his mind [. . .]. What he imagines is nothing like Juliet’s vision of a shared
consummation: the woman is paying the price for the man’s lust ("It would cost you"), and the man is acting not out of love but out of contempt. (69)

Based on Leggatt’s ideas, all Hamlet can feel for Ophelia is an echo of the twisted emotions that he has for Gertrude. He uses her as a whipping post for his mother. “By making Ophelia nothing, Hamlet can project onto her his dread regarding his own feelings of lack. After all, Hamlet is the one riddled with anxiety when faced with the emptiness, the meaninglessness of life [. . .]” (Dane 410). Ophelia is an easy target for the cruelty because she is below his station – unlike his mother who is above him – and unwittingly put in place for just such a purpose.

Harold Bloom supports the idea that Ophelia is a handy outlet for Hamlet’s Oedipal frustrations:

Between Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy and his Shakespeare-like instructing of the players, we are given the prince’s astonishingly brutal verbal assault upon Ophelia, which far surpasses his need to persuade the concealed Claudius of his nephew’s supposed madness. What broader ambivalence Hamlet harbors toward Ophelia, Shakespeare will not tell us, but neither Polonius’s exploitation of his daughter as unwitting spy, nor Hamlet’s association of Ophelia with Gertrude, can account for the vehemence of this denunciation [. . .]. (39)

It is obvious that Bloom sees Hamlet’s explosion as something more than can be easily explained by one psychological diagnosis. However, for Bloom, the answer could still be a simple one: Hamlet is just not capable of love. “That beauty is engendered by
Hamlet’s cruelty, indeed by his failure to love. Despite his passion in the graveyard, we have every reason to doubt his capacity to love anyone, even Ophelia. He does not want or need love […]” (Bloom 44). Being unable to bond with someone would seem to absolve Hamlet of any guilt that he might have in Ophelia’s death because if he is incapable of love then he is most likely incapable of any other strong emotions.

This theory of an inability to love is too simplistic. It is more likely that Hamlet is suffering from some form of PTSD:

If symptoms of post-traumatic stress exist 4 months postevent, it is likely that […] a PTSD has developed. High levels of initial symptoms, therefore, are strong predictors of later symptom levels. Persons who do not reduce the extent of intruding memories, dreams, and images of the death within a short period of time are more likely to have other symptoms that remain, including anxiety, depression, concentration and relationship difficulties, attempts to avoid triggers of the death, and physiological symptoms. Other evidence of PTSD includes the hardening of emotion, feelings of homicidal desire, and depression anxiety that recurs for years. (Nurmi & Williams 59-60)

Throughout the play, Hamlet definitely cycles through most of these symptoms. The polar opposite to the lack of emotion is, of course, that Hamlet feels too much.

Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia tends to be pigeonholed into one main category: the fragile and shy maiden who has fallen in love with the wrong person. According to Harold Bloom, “What emerges clearly is that Hamlet is playacting, and that Ophelia already is the prime victim of his dissembling” (38). She is seen as a pawn who is unable
to think for herself because, as Northrop Frye suggests, “She is bullied by her father, and humiliated by being made a decoy for Hamlet [. . .]” (*On Shakespeare* 96). Gabrielle Dane sums up this treatment rather well:

> From the first, Ophelia’s psychic identity appears externally defined, socially constructed. Although every human psyche might be said, from a psychoanalytic perspective, to be constructed largely as a result of social interactions, Ophelia’s unique development has given her an especially permeable psyche. Motherless and completely circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others’ desires. (406)

We do not know exactly when Ophelia became motherless, but it would be a safe guess that it happened a long time before the play opens. No mention or hint is ever made of her mother. Her main relationships are with her father and brother. Her relationship with Hamlet is probably her first romantic entanglement. However, just because this is her first romance does not mean that she is incapable of feeling deep emotions.

In fact, first loves can have a profound impact on a person’s psyche, which is certainly the case for Ophelia:

> [. . .] when an adolescent encounters first love, the parents – who will react with varying degrees of generosity – usually recognize it as the beginning of that natural separation from the original affective matrix necessary to create new, external ties. We could say that, at this point in the family saga, parents must make the best of the situation. Should that natural
Laertes, at least, seems to have some kind of understanding of how such a relationship should play out but Polonius is not so subtle or wise. When he learns that Hamlet has been making advances towards Ophelia, Polonius does not seem for a moment to believe that Hamlet could possibly be serious in his suit. He does not seem so much concerned with Ophelia’s feelings as with what people will think of him as a father should she succumb to Hamlet’s charms in a dishonorable fashion. “Utterly unconcerned with Ophelia’s needs, Polonius manipulates both her mind and her body to gratify his love of power” (Dane 408). Ophelia does have enough spine to argue for Hamlet’s sincerity and honor, but Polonius still refuses to believe it.

No doubt Polonius has been giving the matter some thought because the scene closes with him ordering Ophelia to put an end to the meetings:

This is for all:

I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,

Have you so slander any moment leisure

As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

Look to’t, I charge you. Come your ways. (1.3.132-26)

Ophelia has little choice but to say, “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3.137). The exchange shows that “Whereas Ophelia is angel to Laertes, she is asset to Polonius, a commodity to be disposed of, ideally at the greatest profit to himself. Relegating her to a perpetual childhood, Polonius educates his ‘green girl’ (1.3.101) to be an obedient automaton
willing to acquiesce to his every command” (Dane 407). There is little doubt that Polonius’s admonitions have crushed her hopes of continuing her relationship with Hamlet.

The first time that we hear of Hamlet and Ophelia interacting after this exchange is in the beginning of Act 2. Hamlet has conversed with the Ghost, and this disturbing event sets him off kilter. To further confound things, Ophelia has obeyed her father:

Hamlet does not, as the popular theory supposes, break with Ophelia directly after the Ghost appears to him; on the contrary, he tries to see her and sends letters to her (II.i.109). What really happens is that Ophelia suddenly repels his visits and letters. Now, we know that she is simply obeying her father’s order, but how would her action appear to Hamlet, already sick at heart because of his mother’s frailty, and now finding that, the moment fortune has turned against him, the woman who had welcomed his love turns against him too? (Bradley 149)

This rejection comes at a time when Hamlet needs her the most. His already tortured mind has little defense against this blow. It could be argued that Hamlet instigates the chamber scene with Ophelia as a means to deflect from his plotting against Claudius, but it is just as likely that he is not wholly himself at that moment. “It is difficult to formulate conflict when affection and emotional relationships are involved. The motives, intentions, and even the observable behavioral patterns are multifaceted and layered” (Horowitz, *Cognitive Psychodynamics* 4). Hamlet could have had some kind of psychotic break from the stress.
At the beginning of Act 2, Ophelia is upset and goes to Polonius to tell him what has happened. “It is when Hamlet bursts into Ophelia’s chamber that tragic misunderstanding becomes operative. The distress and perplexity which the incident arouses in her is sufficiently communicated in her report to Polonius” (Nosworthy 46). Hamlet looked almost like a mournful specter because his clothing is in a disarray and he said nothing to her (2.1.89-102). The incident does sound very melodramatic, and thus contrived, but it is possible that he is simply at a loss for something to say. Hamlet may also have been testing Ophelia to see how she would react to him in such a state. Or he could simply have been trying to silently give her a message about his state of mind because, no doubt, anything that he would have said would have gotten back to Polonius and then his uncle. For Polonius, and by extension then Ophelia, the natural conclusion is that Hamlet has gone mad for want of her love.

While he may not be pining away for her, their separation does have an effect on Hamlet’s mental stability. No doubt this schism exacerbates the mental trauma that he is already feeling. Proof of how her snubs have affected Hamlet comes at the beginning of Act 3. Polonius has convinced Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet’s odd actions are due to his separation from Ophelia. They set up a “chance” meeting between the two lovers to discern if this is really the cause. Ophelia goes along with this plan because she really has no choice. She does not want to hurt Hamlet any further, but she has been told to continue the facade that she no longer loves him in order for Claudius and Polonius to gage his reactions. As was mentioned before, his reactions throughout the play could be seen as classic representatives of trauma symptoms. “PTSD is often associated with depression, mistrust of others, and heightened irritability or aggression (Chapter 1).
These can lead to interpersonal problems, just as interpersonal problems can exacerbate PTSD” (Taylor 38). It is a vicious cycle that can be hard to break away from without the proper help and motivation.

None of them knows that before the encounter, Hamlet has just gone through a deep soul searching in the “To be or not to be” speech. This monologue is a perfect depiction of his self absorption and mental chaos. On the heels of this unsettling monologue, Hamlet sees Ophelia. At the initial moment his tender feelings are revealed to be still intact because he considers her “fair” (3.1.90). He may be expecting some sort of sweet reunion with her, but she quickly dashes any such hopes by saying that she would like to return the items that he had given her. No doubt he should have expected such an event but, “The point is that she has rejected him without apparent cause, at the time when he most needs her support, and has returned his gifts with words that may not be entirely innocent of provocation” (Nosworthy 49). The timing could hardly be worse.

This act causes his mood to change in an instant from soft lover to incredulous victim:

Because young men are so apt to fantasize about women and project onto them desired qualities of perfect womanhood that are unrealizable, the men are prone to disillusionment. They are fearful of rejection, fearful above all that the object of their desire will unman them by turning to some other male, thereby displaying a scorn for the wooer’s very virility. (Bevington 58)
Ophelia is someone to whom he should have been able to go to for solace. Someone who would have been sympathetic to his pain even if he could not tell her everything. Hamlet reacts with what could be seen as confrontive anger:

Recognizing that the loss of a loved person, with its many frustrations and disappointments, leads to feelings of helplessness, it is only natural that the bereaved long for support from everyone. When this support, for one reason or another, is not forthcoming from family and friends, the bereaved person feels isolated, betrayed, or deserted. The bereaved may then confront these persons with irritability and hostility, as a by-product of their feelings of betrayal. (Sanders 62)

His interaction with her clearly shows hostility. Hamlet plays with Ophelia’s emotions and crushes them. At this moment he wants her to not just empathize with his pain, but he wants to make her feel it too:

[. . .]Ophelia’s lover blithely disregards her psychological needs in favor of his own. Within Hamlet’s imaginative universe, for a woman to be “honest” means that she be both chaste and loyal. Lacking autonomous desire, Hamlet’s honest woman would serve as an inert mirror, distorted just enough to reflect back his royal image slightly enlarged. (Dane 408)

If she will not be his ally then she must be his enemy and thus will not escape the encounter unscathed.

One moment he admits that he loved her (3.1.116), and the next he declares that he never did (3.1.120):
Men turn women into objects they long to possess. Their longing for such possession makes them vulnerable to a disappointment that again is deeply personal; it is an affront to the male ego to be denied his self-proclaimed right to own and control the object of his desire. Such a longing is inherently unstable. Perhaps for these reasons, men in Shakespeare are also inclined to be inconstant in their vows to women. (Bevington 58)

He speaks ill of himself and men in general, harps upon how horrible marriage is, and how she should flee to a nunnery to avoid breeding more people like them.27 His words are wild28 and accusatory, yet there is a certain cunningness to them:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on 't; it hath made me mad. (3.1.144-49)

The crux of his rants comes from his anger at Gertrude and the fact that she has betrayed (as he sees it) both him and his father by marrying Claudius:

The aphorism “Frailty, thy name is woman” (I.ii.146) allows him to include Ophelia in the misogyny centered on Gertrude. The long stare he

27 See Bloom 41.

28 This is corroborated by Dane 411.
gives her in her closet may be his way of looking for signs of Gertrude in her. He is compulsive about both women: the “nunnery” and closet scenes are marked by the same device, a series of false endings as Hamlet, seemingly finished with the woman, comes back and attacks her again.

(Leggatt 69)

At this moment he has not been able to direct his animosity at his true target and so takes everything out on Ophelia. However, she is not capable of seeing any ulterior motives for this behavior. If she did then maybe she could connect his words with something other than herself.

It is possible that having masculine role models could have made Ophelia wiser about men than the previous theories suggest. After all, she is occasionally portrayed as someone with wit and intelligence. Leggatt suggests that this interpretation is possible:

We have our own questions, our own problem of reading Ophelia and her relations with Hamlet. When she hands back his love-tokens, declaring, “to the noble mind / Rich gifts wax poor when the givers prove unkind” (III.i.100-1), she appears to be breaking with Hamlet on her own initiative, for her own reasons, not just following her father’s orders. She declares the trouble began not with her but with Hamlet’s unkindness, and using for herself the term she will later use for the unfallen Hamlet, “the noble mind,” she asserts her self-respect. (72)

Ophelia has already expressed her worry about his state of mind when she tells Polonius of Hamlet’s visit to her (2.1.79-102). She is capable of forming her own opinions about Hamlet’s behavior and is aware that he has been treating her rather oddly.
However, “This is a stronger, more independent Ophelia than we might have expected; yet she does all this knowing Polonius is listening, and the possibility remains that she is carrying out his orders without betraying his involvement, putting the best face on it she can” (Leggatt 72). So, her words may very well not be her own. She may have been told what to say as surely as she had been told how to act. Such an idea is supported by the second act when Polonius worries that she may have said things to Hamlet on her own:

LORD POLONIUS

What, have you given him any hard words of late?

OPHELIA

No, my good lord, but, as you did command, I did repel his fetters and denied His access to me. (2.1.109-12)

So, though Ophelia is free to think whatever she likes, she performs her filial obligations as they are taught to her. Ophelia is not prepared for the aftermath of what happens when she confronts Hamlet. Any wit and intelligence that she does have do little to help her cope with the onslaught of her emotions, and she is ruined (unlike Hamlet who perseveres).

Ophelia comes to believe that she is solely responsible for Hamlet’s breakdown:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form,
Th’ observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me,
T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1.153-64)

She is utterly heartbroken by the exchange. It is not hard to believe that she would assimilate Hamlet’s harsh words and use them against herself:

Consider for the moment how matters looked to her. She knows nothing about the Ghost and its disclosures. She has undergone for some time the pain of repelling her lover and appearing to have turned against him. She sees him, or hears of him, sinking daily into deeper gloom, and so transformed from what he was that he is considered to be out of his mind. She hears the question constantly discussed what the cause of this sad change can be; and her heart tells her [. . .] that her unkindness is the chief cause. (Bradley 155-56)
Her exchange with Hamlet is the beginning of Ophelia’s own dealings with trauma, because the confrontation has left her feeling utterly bereft.

Some stage and film versions of the play have Hamlet physically assaulting Ophelia on top of verbally abusing her. Such interpretations add another layer to her trauma especially because of Polonius’s lack of reaction:

A betrayal paradigm calls for action at a cultural level to address the occurrence of and problems caused by interpersonal violence. Building the relational context of interpersonal violence into the model, the betrayal paradigm more urgently ties individual health and well-being to the social context of the particular individual, as well as the context of the culture. Specifically, the ways in which the culture addresses interpersonal violence or supports violence (either explicitly or implicitly) necessarily affect the level of distress and healing in victims of interpersonal violence.

(DePrince 88)

Had Polonius sought to immediately comfort her, the reactions to this incident may have been less severe. ²⁹

Ophelia’s mental state is further unbalanced before the play-within-the-play because Hamlet chooses to interact with her in such a way that could only be confusing to her. He chooses to sit by her instead of next to his mother and begins a banter that is very edged. “[. . .] Hamlet’s love, though never lost, was, after Ophelia’s apparent rejection of him, mingled with suspicion and resentment, and that his treatment of her was due in part

²⁹ See also Dane 408.
to this cause. [...] But the question how much his harshness is meant to be real, and how much assumed, seems to me impossible in some places to answer” (Bradley 151). Whether he is purposefully being cruel here does not matter because “The context and others’ reactions may moderate the degree to which the event is initially dissonant or conflictual” (Litz et al. 700). Hamlet’s manner only serves to heighten Ophelia’s distress.

How long this treatment would have gone on is hard to say because the next time that we see Ophelia is after her father’s death and burial. Combine the fact that her (former) lover has caused her biggest grief with her already overwhelming sense of guilt, and it is little wonder that Ophelia’s mind is devastated at this point. No doubt a part of her feels responsible for her father’s death:

Many trauma survivors exaggerate or distort the importance of their roles in traumatic events and experience excessive guilt as a consequence (e.g., ‘I should have realized that the situation would be dangerous,’ ‘I should have fought back against the rapist’). According to Kubany and Manke (1995), trauma survivors tend to draw four kinds of faulty conclusions about their role in the trauma: (1) many survivors believe they ‘knew’ what was going to happen before it was possible to know, or that they dismissed or overlooked clues that ‘signaled’ what was going to happen (hindsight bias, i.e., outcome knowledge tends to bias the person’s recollections of what they actually know before the events occurred); (2) many survivors believe that their trauma-related actions were less justified than would be concluded on the basis of an objective analysis of the facts (justification disorientation); (3) many survivors accept an inordinate share
of responsibility for causing the trauma or related negative outcomes (responsibility distortion); (4) many survivors believe they violated personal or moral convictions even though their intentions and actions were consistent with their convictions (wrongdoing distortion). (Taylor 34)

Ophelia’s reaction falls under numbers one and three. After all, if she had never spurned Hamlet, he would never have gone mad and killed Polonius. Plus, because of these actions, Hamlet has been banished. She will never get to see him again to make amends:

No one in the play observes that Hamlet fails Ophelia. We see her and can collect from the fragments of her madness an idea of her profound shock from the cruel disappointment of maiden ardor, along with her grief for the father Hamlet killed. Her loss of Hamlet, indeed, is partly expressed through grief for her father. But Hamlet is off at sea; he is not brought to confront anything of how he has failed her. (Barber and Wheeler 261)

Ophelia has lost two of the three men that she holds most dear, and Laertes is too far away to be of immediate help. “The circumstances of Ophelia’s madness are all bound up with the tragic story of her love. Deprived of her lover, deprived of her father at the hands of her lover, she wanders abroad [. . .]” (Nosworthy 50). Her mind cannot handle the weight of it all and breaks.

Ophelia does not have the mentality, life experience, or outside resources to be able to process everything that has happened:
People with few supraordinate schemas, and with antithetical self schemas, are vulnerable to explosive shifts in state. Under stress they are vulnerable and in conscious memory are apt to dissociate their various identity experiences. They tend to use defensive control processes that disavow or distort reality instead of those that lead to a dose-by-dose style of coping with emotional challenges. (Horowitz, *Cognitive Psychodynamics* 90)

Ophelia is incapable of going through the grieving process in a healthy manner. Nor is she able to turn her pain outward onto Hamlet. “It is difficult to correct a core belief about a personal defect (Tangney et al., 2007) or a destructive interpersonal or societal response, especially when these contingencies lead to a pervasive withdrawal from others” (Litz et al. 702). Ophelia keeps everything internal, but does not have the wherewithal to keep the mental trauma from devouring her sense of self. She wanders through the castle, sometimes calm and sometimes with frenetic energy. "[. . .] clinical studies indicate that major stress events tend to be followed by involuntary repetition in thought, emotion, and behavior. Such responses tend to occur in phases and to alternate with periods of relatively successful warding off of repetitions as manifested by ideational denial and emotional numbness" (Horowitz, *Stress Response* 21). Her lucid moments show a vagueness and sometimes she almost seems on the verge of returning to normal, but then her mind skitters away from her.  

No doubt this behavior is an avoidance tactic meant to protect her from having to deal with the hard reality that has now become her world.

30 See Putnam 417.
Ophelia has been betrayed by both others and herself:

The young woman Jacques Lacan calls “that piece of bait named Ophelia” is used, abused, confused, – utterly manipulated by the men in her life: father, lover, brother, king. Scoffed at, ignored, suspected, disbelieved, commanded to distrust her own feelings, thoughts and desires, Ophelia is fragmented by contrary messages. (Dane 406)

We are confronted with the possibility of betrayal all of the time. One of our natural inclinations is to forget that a betrayal even occurred. Or to put on blinders that will not allow us to see whatever the event is in such terms. However, there are times when we simply cannot use these defense mechanisms any longer. When our coping mechanisms fail us, how we have assimilated the past traumas will be reflected in how we respond to the current one:

Being sensitive to betrayal brings pain, and the pain can be great. When the betrayer is someone on whom we are dependent, the very mechanisms that normally protect us — a sensitivity to cheating and the pain that motivates us to change things so that we will no longer be in danger — become a problem. We must block awareness of the betrayal, forget it, in order to ensure that we behave in ways that maintain the relationship on which we are dependent. (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 74)

For Ophelia, she did not have time to assimilate Hamlet’s rejection. She internalized it. "Denial is the term given a phase relevant to the implications of the stressful event in which there is some combination of emotional numbing, ideational avoidance, and
behavioral constriction" (Horowitz, *Stress Response* 56). Her mind has gone to a place where she does not have to deal with the trauma.

Hamlet was too wrapped up in his own pain to see the bigger picture of what might be going on. Had he been less focused upon himself, he might have been less callous with Ophelia earlier on:

Hamlet has acted scornfully and cruelly toward Ophelia, and then some. I have already stressed the demeaning aggression and the humiliation that he constantly imposes on her, once she has become for him the very symbol of the rejection of his desire. Then, suddenly, the object regains its immediacy and its worth for him [. . .] [when he sees her funeral].”

(Lacan, Miller, and Hulbert 36)

That may not have prevented her from having a breakdown after her father died, but she would certainly not have been as vulnerable at the time it occurred.31 Still, they both have some blame in what happened, but Ophelia’s sanity is the first to die from those tragic errors.

**Parent/Child**

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet is understandably traumatized by his father’s death: “The loss of a parent when one is young, particularly when the parent has been a strong support, leaves the survivor with the realization that he or she must now fend for themselves” (Sanders 201). The word “young” is relative, and Hamlet’s physical age

31 See Neely 335.
could certainly be beyond the concept, but there are several key elements (he is a student, not married, etc) that point to his mental age, at least, falling into a “young” category. Using Daniel Levinson’s “The Seasons of a Man’s Life” as a template for the phases of adulthood, Hamlet would still be in the “novice phase,” which runs from about the age of 17 until 33 “plus or minus two years at either end” (71):

The novice phase begins with the Early Adult Transition (roughly age 17 to 22). A young man is now on the boundary between pre-adulthood and early adulthood. He is creating a basis for adult life without being fully within it. The second period, Entering the Adult World, lasts from about 22 to 28. His tasks now are to explore the possibilities of this world, to test some initial choices, and to build a first, provisional life structure.

The third period, the Age Thirty Transition, provides an opportunity for revising the initial structure and moving toward the second structure. (71)

Considering Hamlet’s station in life and the fact that the ages can skew a little, he is still within the second period when his father dies. “Hamlet is unique among the plays from the great tragic period in the Prince’s being presented from the first in the role of a son seeking identity through his actual, lost father” (Barber and Wheeler 249). That death should have moved him into the next part if not straight into the next phase (“The Settling Down Period”).

Losing one’s parents is always a shock, but the younger a person is, the more devastating it can be and, for a son, losing a father at a younger age can have the greatest impact:
“Too soon.” The phrase resounds through the lives of sons who lose their fathers in young adulthood. Men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two – the “novice stage” of life, in the words of sociologist Daniel Levinson – enjoy most of the legal prerogatives of full adulthood. But, by their own admission, they still are works in progress. Most of the sons I talked with who’d lost fathers in early adulthood said that, at the time of the death, they had still been dependent on their fathers – for guidance, money, and emotional support. In addition, they said, they almost always had unfinished business with their dads: resentments unexpressed, affection unacknowledged. (Chethik 47)

Granted, because of his station, Hamlet’s “home base” is intrinsically tied to his family’s home, but he would still be expected to have created his own branch even if it was simply a continuation. One of the problems is that he did not have a chance to do this on his own before or after his father’s death:

The death of a father during a son’s young adulthood – which happens to approximately one in five men – tends to sever a vital relationship before it’s reached fruition, before the son has completed the key task of Levinson’s novice stage: to shift his center of gravity from his family of origin to his own home base. Given this, it is no surprise that the immediate impact of the death of a father is often as devastating for young adults as it is for children. (Chethik 48)

At the beginning of the play, his life is still hovering in a novice limbo and is now complicated by his having to deal with the trauma of his father’s sudden death.
The circumstances surrounding the events and his relationship with his family in the play itself are what make the dynamic unusual. “When a death occurs, there’s no escaping its impact on all of the other relationships. The death upsets the balance. It reveals flaws and weaknesses that were covered up for a long time. The death of a parent can bring into sharp relief the myths, fears, and struggles within each family” (Akner and Whitney 137). Having a father die unexpectedly is not uncommon for any time period. Nor is it surprising to have a parent remarry within a time frame that seems rather abrupt (though the fact that Gertrude marries Claudius within a month of her husband’s death is a little astonishing). Because of these two things, it is understandable that Hamlet is both in mourning for his father and angry with his mother and uncle. “The death of a parent leaves normally levelheaded people with their antennae raised for insult and injury. If you talk to people who have just buried a parent, chances are you’ll find many tales about slights from family members and friends. They have exquisite memories for what others did or said” (Akner and Whitney 61). It is not even very difficult to accept that a widow would marry her brother-in-law, in light of historical and cultural precedents.  

Instead, the true unconventionality of the arrangement comes from the appearance of the Ghost. His appearance exacerbates the unexpected grief syndrome that Hamlet has been experiencing:

The unexpected grief syndrome: This occurs following major losses which are unexpected and untimely; they give rise to a defensive reaction of shock or disbelief, which delays the full emotional reaction but does not

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32 See Bradley 121.
prevent moderate to high levels of anxiety from being experienced.

Typically, the grieving process is complicated by a persisting sense of the presence of the dead person, feelings of self-reproach, and feelings of continued obligation to the dead which make it hard for the bereaved to make a fresh start. (Parkes 13)

In this case, he is not just sensing his father’s presence, he actually sees his father and has witnesses to confirm it as a fact: “[. . .] two aspects of attention are important to understanding the cognitive processes of trauma. First, we have the ability to focus on and become aware of just one part of reality. Second and separately, we are simultaneously likely to process to some degree unattended aspects of reality” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 94).

The Ghost’s physical manifestation confuses the grieving process, and his story adds more baggage to an already overwhelmed emotional state:

The temporal concurrence of multiple losses or of loss with other developmental milestones or stressors produces a pileup of stress that is likely to overwhelm families, complicating tasks of mourning. The concurrence of stress events may be coincidental. In other cases, significant loss or a near-death experience may trigger other relationship changes, such as divorce, precipitous marriage, or conception of a child [. . .]. (Walsh and McGoldrick 18-19)

Hamlet already feels betrayed by his mother and Claudius because of their marriage, but once the Ghost appears and tells him the true story, it becomes clear that the betrayal runs even deeper and his father becomes another party to it:
A core issue is that in some cases the circumstances of death in and of themselves represent a horrific and shocking encounter with death and thus lead to a traumatic stress reaction. For those bereaved in this way, the reactive processes of grief and those of traumatic stress make the response to the death and loss more “stressful,” complex, and difficult to resolve. The impact of the traumatic stressor may lock the person to the death itself, its circumstance, horror, and images, and to the issues of personal survival in the face of terror, violence, and mass destruction. Grief and grieving may not be possible until later or not at all. (Raphael, Martinek, and Wooding 492)

Thus, the level of parental betrayal is threefold: father (Ghost), mother, uncle/stepfather.

The legitimacy of the Ghost can be rather difficult to pinpoint. “Everything hinges on the authenticity of the Ghost, both as an objective experience and as a legitimate source of moral strength” (Barber and Wheeler 248). If the Ghost is not real, then it could be argued that the Ghost is a hallucination because that can be a PTSD symptom:

This involuntary repetition includes recurrence in thought of stress event experiences, of feelings related to the original experience, or behavioral reenactments of the experience itself. Repetitions in thought may take many forms including nightmares, dreams, hallucinations, pseudohallucinations, recurrent unbidden images, illusions, and recurrent obsessive ideas. (Horowitz, Stress Response 20)
However, if we suppose that the Ghost is real in the beginning (because others have seen him), then it can be shown that he is injuring Hamlet’s peace of mind/psyche by revealing the murder:

The opening questions he goes on to ask, about where the Ghost comes from and what it may mean, introduce the problematic situation of the whole play; they confirm the Ghost’s reality as a thing that escapes the categories that control the perception of reality, including those of received religious tradition. Shakespeare uses all the resources of his art to set the situation up that way, making it unambiguously clear, by the Ghost’s independent appearance in the opening scene, that it is no hallucination or projection that simply springs from the overwrought mind of Hamlet. (Barber and Wheeler 247)

The Ghost’s visitation is a betrayal of the parental role of a father protecting his child because, by asking him for vengeance, he puts Hamlet in danger. Claudius would obviously not want it to be known that he committed fratricide/regicide and, as we know from later in the play, would do anything to keep that secret hidden.  

In a way, this request puts the Ghost on par with Agamemnon because both are willing to sacrifice their child to suit their own political agenda and vengeful justice. Both are also relying on their child’s love and loyalty to get what they want:

AGAMEMNON

Daughter - the very word, its sacred rights,

33 See Barber and Wheeler 55-6.
Her youth, my blood, are not What! bemoan.

I weep for countless virtues - mutual love,

Her filial piety, my tenderness,

And, what stands foremost in her heart, respect, (Racine, 1.1.114-18)

GHOST

If thou didst ever thy dear father love— (Shakespeare, Hamlet 1.5.24)

Agamemnon refers to what Iphigénie will do as a “sacrifice” (1.1.121) instead of the Ghost’s “revenge” (1.5.26), but they are essentially the same thing because Iphigénie and Hamlet’s obedience will lead to each of them losing their lives in order for their fathers to gain what they desire. Even though both men are being spurred on by heavenly powers to make these requests, they are primarily culpable in the trauma that their children suffer after the truth is revealed.

Despite both men couching what must be done in terms of filial obligation, there are two major differences in how the fathers present their information. The most obvious one is that Agamemnon is unable to give the request to Iphigénie himself. He relies upon others to be the messengers. But the Ghost has no such problem. Maybe it is because he is now a spirit and his time and focus are unilaterally directed, but the Ghost comes across as having very little sentimentality (except for when his thoughts touch upon Gertrude). He has been wronged and his son is the one person who can avenge him and set things right (both politically and personally):

What Hamlet finds in the Ghost, however, is not the actual father. Nor does he find a paternal image that, in the son’s development toward
adulthood, has been subdued to realistic perception of the father’s human limitations. The Ghost is so deeply disturbing, for Hamlet and for an audience that experiences the play through him, because it presents an embodiment of the father perceived, as in infancy, under the sway of omnipotence of mind. (Barber and Wheeler 249)

No doubt he expects Hamlet to be just as calm and collected about the matter as he is himself.

This lack of paternal emotion emphasizes the other difference. Agamemnon repeatedly talks about love (his for Iphigénie, hers for him, etc), and he is obviously emotional and sentimental in his thoughts about her. However, the Ghost shows no such overt sensibility for Hamlet. The closest he can manage is to say that he finds Hamlet “apt” (1.5.32) and even then he has to follow up the sentiment with a warning barb: “And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed / That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, / Wouldst thou not stir in this” (1.5.33-35). These are the words of a father admonishing his child to obey him no matter what the consequences are:

Blocked in his effort to internalize his father’s heritage by his grief and by his mother’s marriage to the hated, sensual stepfather, Hamlet confronts on the battlements a regressively constructed image of the idealized father whose overpowering presence demands the son’s absolute dedication of himself to vindicating the paternal ideal. (Barber and Wheeler 249)

The child is useless if he does not fulfill his father’s commands. Hamlet’s real problem is that he must try to find a way to appease a figure who has no tangible connection to those around him:
Access to the mystery of the Ghost, with the subsequent effort to identify totally with him, does not resolve Hamlet’s predicament as a son struggling for identity through relationship to the father. The Ghost disrupts Hamlet’s relation to the world and himself; it also disrupts the play, or makes the play radically disruptive. (Barber and Wheeler 30)

In other words, he must fulfill his filial obligation to a memory. “From a Christian vantage point, Hamlet’s difficulty stems from his total devotion to his dead father; for most of the play he is unable to get past this allegiance, unable to transcend it for an allegiance to the divine” (Barber and Wheeler 30). His father can no longer truly be helped or harmed by the further actions of the living, but Hamlet can and will be.

Instead of love, the Ghost uses fear, pity, and honor as his emotional levers to get Hamlet to pursue vengeance:

Revenge and love are, of course, the ever-present ingredients of Shakespearian tragedy; they extend in varying ratios [. . .] where things go awry, so that love degenerates into conspicuous waste and revenge into impotent vituperation. And it is significant that, for Shakespeare as for Aristotle, crime and retribution within the family produce the most effective form of tragedy [. . .]. (Nosworthy 42)

After getting Hamlet’s attention, his first words elicit both fear and pity: “My hour is almost come, / When I to sulf’rous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself” (1.5.2-4). While he claims that he does not want Hamlet’s pity (1.5.5), invoking that emotion along with fear is a classic Aristotelean moment for grabbing his audience and
winning them (or, in this case, him) to his side. It warns Hamlet to expect a veritable tale of woe:

I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine: (1.5.10-21)

Since Hamlet does indeed love his father (as the Ghost ponders not long after saying the above) he has little choice in feeling moved by the Ghost’s fate.

These things combine to prime him to be willing to aid the Ghost in any way that he can once he learns that his father was murdered: “Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.30-32). Hamlet is quick to claim the Ghost’s vengeance as his own before even knowing who has committed the crime. In fact, there is little need for the Ghost to goad
him further with “If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;” (1.5.82). What child could possibly sit idly by while his father’s murderer prospers? Finding out that it is Claudius, his father’s own brother, only briefly stuns him, but the full tale rouses in him such a mixture of powerful emotions that his mind is barely coherent.

The Ghost’s final request seems fairly tame compared to his earlier admonishments, “Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me” (1.5.92). We already knew that his father was ever present in Hamlet’s thoughts, so there is little doubt that he will be remembered. “It is accepted that in grief, the stimuli and recollections relate both to the actual circumstances of the loss and to the lost individual, that is, to the substance of what has been lost as well as to the manner of that loss” (Simpson 11). However, in the end, the Ghost was not asking Hamlet to remember him, but to remember what has been done to him and he succeeds in that happening:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?

And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,

But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven. (1.5.93-113)

It is not surprising that the ghost’s appearance has sparked such a reaction:

Hamlet here renounces all the growing out into the world by which a youth becomes a man, in his full social role, freeing himself from family bonds while remaining true to the core of his relationship to them. A radical withdrawal of investment in society is demanded by the total investment in the family ties – of love and loyalty to his lost father, and of hatred for those who have degraded the royal heritage, his mother and the grossly sensual parody of a father who has taken King Hamlet’s place [. . .]. (Barber and Wheeler 251)

Hamlet has had to remain idle for weeks with only grief to occupy his mind. No doubt he wished that there was something he could do to bring his father back or to prevent his death. Since he cannot do that, the next best thing is to honor his father’s memory by avenging him.

Hamlet now has a specific focus for his pain and anger:

In any particular state of mind, a person could derive his or her conscious sense of identity from information in just one self schema. Another

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34 This is corroborated by Barber and Wheeler 29.
experience of identity could be formed from a supraordinate schema combining several possible selves. If these possible selves are not conflicted, the result can be a richer and more differentiated episode of self-reflection. (Horowitz, Cognitive Psychodynamics 89)

He is even able to transfer some of his angst against his mother onto Claudius. The only problem is that he is only able to maintain the focus of his determination for a short amount of time. The moment that he is allowed to be alone to think, he wavers and all of his doubts resurface:

Conflicted supraordinate configurations contain dilemmas of purpose: The person may anticipate both desired and dreaded outcomes of the same aims. The threatening and dreaded consequences of wishes can be prevented through a shift into schemas for defensive compromises. Then neither the wished-for role nor the feared role is activated. Instead, the person activates the defensive self schema, which reduces risk of entering into an out-of-control and dangerous state of mind. The conflicted configuration includes the desired, dreaded, and compromise roles.

(Horowitz, Cognitive Psychodynamics 96)

The Ghost encounter has sent his mind into another kind of limbo:

Freud has described a type of melancholia in which the normal process of grieving is prevented by the hostile component of an ambivalent tie to the person lost, whether by death or disenchantment or rejection. Instead of a gradual withdrawal from the attachment, the lost person is kept by an identification that sustains the original ambivalence. Suppressed hostility
in the relationship to the loved, lost person who is also hated is turned back upon the self and expressed as violent self-reproaches and self-loathing. Painful dejection goes with a sense of one’s unworthiness as measured against an idealized image of the lost beloved, which becomes, through the identification, an unattainable ideal for the self. (Barber and Wheeler 254) [Mourning and Melancholia]

Hamlet becomes “[. . .] a man who at any other time and in any other circumstances than those presented would have been perfectly equal to his task; and it is, in fact, the very cruelty of his fate that the crisis of his life comes on him at the one moment when he cannot meet it, and when his higher gifts, instead of helping him, conspire to paralyse him” (Bradley 109). It is only after he has confirmed his suspicions through the mock play and confronted his mother that he is able to work his way towards true healing and focus.

I briefly touched on Hamlet’s relationship with Gertrude in the previous section. There is little doubt that Hamlet loves his mother. He agrees to stay in Denmark at her request: “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I prithee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg” (1.2.118-19). Yet it is obvious that he has reluctantly honored her request. It is not just that his father has died, but that his mother has remarried so quickly. These actions seem to be the main focus of despair in his first soliloquy:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,

That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely. That it should come to this!

But two months dead: nay, not so much, not two: (1.2.129-38)

No one could possibly live up to his father who was “So excellent a king” (1.2.139).

Hamlet had placed Gertrude on a kind of parental/marital pedestal before her marriage to Claudius: “[. . .] why, she would hang on him, / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on [. . .]” (1.2.143-45). But after the marriage, he cannot help but to see her in a different light:

[..] Frailty, thy name is woman! –

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she follow'd my poor father's body,

Like Niobe, all tears: – why she, even she –

O, God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,

Would have mourn'd longer – married with my uncle,

My father's brother, but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules: within a month:

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,

She married. O, most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

It is not nor it cannot come to good:

But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue. (1.2.146-59)

She is no longer a model wife/mother, but instead just another fallible human being who has given in to her base instincts:

Whatever doubts he may have about the Ghost, he seems sure of Gertrude: her marriage is a betrayal of marriage itself, a deed that “from the body of contraction plucks / The very soul, and sweet religion makes/ A rhapsody of words. (III.iv.46-48) The particular moves to the general: the very ideas of contract, religion itself, and finally language, are violated by what Gertrude has done. (Leggatt 69-70)

The fact that Hamlet acknowledges her to be a sexual creature seems an odd way for a son to think of his mother, but it is the only explanation that he can summon to explain why she would marry so soon after his father’s death:

Toward his uncle he feels fury and contempt; toward his mother he feels regret and deep disappointment. Boys and young men generally find it uncomfortable to think of their parents engaging in sexual intercourse. How much more intolerable, then, to dwell on the prospect of one’s mother having sex with another man — worst of all, with one’s father’s brother!

(Bevington 118)
She does not seem to have been forced into it, so the only other option is that she somehow desired it.

Being seen as a person driven by desire does little to promote Gertrude as a noble creature, but it does free her of suspicion in his father’s death, because, if she is someone who is prone to act on feeling rather than thinking, it is doubtful that she would have had the ability to plot with Claudius. The Ghost confirms that when he tells Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught” (1.5.86-87):

Up till now she has seemed good-natured but morally obtuse, justifying Hamlet’s view of her if not the extreme language in which he couches it. Her marriage is technically an offense, but we see enough of Claudius’ charm to make it understandable at the personal level, and she may have been brought into the argument implied in the King’s first speech that she is assuring the continuity of the state. We may wonder if the Ghost reads her accurately. His command to leave her “to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (I.v.87-88) suggests an inner torment of which we see no evidence till Hamlet himself awakens her conscience. It is from this point that the questions begin to multiply.

(Leggatt 70-71)

If she had been just as guilty as Claudius, he would have named her as an accomplice. Either way, though, Gertrude is still guilty of betraying her son because she married and supports the man who has taken away Hamlet’s birthright. It is possible that she saw it as the only way to truly secure both their positions, but there is no evidence that she is capable of such cunning.
Gertrude confirms her innocence of the murder when Hamlet confronts her, though, at first, she also does not seem to understand why Hamlet is so angry with her. Only when he vents his rage at her and speaks plainly is she able to understand the true scope of the situation:

A murderer and a villain,

A slave that is not twentieth part the kith

Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,

That from a shelf the precious diadem stole

And put it in his pocket— (3.4.99-104)

Hamlet is the only one to see the Ghost, who appears right after these words, causing Gertrude to wonder if he has truly gone mad:

The Queen is not imaginative like her son. She does not see visions, nor hear the voice of repentance speaking to her, nor can she understand her own son [. . .] . Like Lady Macbeth, and the daughters of King Lear, she has no shadow-sight to keep her from her sins. To her, therefore, Hamlet is mad; for we always judge others by our own inability either to see or not to see what they apparently behold or dream they are beholding. (Watt 255)

Despite this blindness, she is willing to believe in her son and to try to rectify the damage that she has done to him (and also to herself) by marrying Claudius. This confrontation is
one of the few times that any of the characters has a chance to heal his or her wounds by reconciling with his or her betrayer and it proves to be quite cathartic.

The bedroom scene is actually a major turning point in the action. By the end of their conversation, Hamlet is once again calm and focused and he more or less manages to remain that way for the rest of the play. His exchange with Claudius about Polonius’s body is more cunning than madness:

As we watch the play, or are swept along in reading it, we are not invited to pause over the cruelty of Hamlet’s taunts. The killing of Polonius makes more real the violence pent up in Hamlet; there is relief that he has reached to action, even if only in premeditated response, together with regret that it is not, as for a moment he thinks is possible, the King he has killed. Polonius has been exhibited as something of a fool in his own right, a dotard version of the father-figure. The lack of compunction Hamlet feels about a man dead functions for us as a measure of the intensity of his deep sense of outrage about the people who matter. Indeed, his ruthlessness is somehow a testimony to his all-absorbing, heroic commitment to feeling the outrage done to life by the murdering of his father and by what he perceives as his mother’s infidelity. (Barber and Wheeler 259)

Hamlet knows that his suspicions have been firmly revealed, but he still has no solid evidence. He must retreat and figure out a new approach to avenging his father. Because he has killed Polonius, attacking Claudius outright would only imperil him further at this
point. So, Hamlet must retreat and Claudius’s plan to send him to England works in both their favors.

Going to England manages to give Hamlet some time and space away to heal from his mental wounds:

    Our indiscretion sometime serves us well

    When our deep plots do fall, and that should learn us

    There's a divinity that shapes our ends,

    Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.8-11)

The Hamlet who returns to Denmark in the last act is very different from the one who was first seen brooding in the very beginning of the play. There are still momentary glimpses of that “other” Hamlet, but he is more able to snap himself out of these moments. He is calmer, more introspective, and somewhat healed from his experiences. Hamlet had the fortitude to overcome a great deal of trauma, and he could have had a successful kingship. However, in the end, a final act of betrayal in the form of a poisoned sword cuts that future far too short.
CHAPTER 5
RICHARD III

Parent/Child

Shakespeare’s *Richard III* is more a play about family drama and political intrigue than it is about presenting historical facts. Events and people are condensed and shuffled around to suit the dramatic nature of the piece which increases the tragic essence of the story and makes it relatively easy to divorce the characters and their responses from the historical beings that they are supposed to represent:

[. . .] it seems clear that Shakespeare didn’t start with a character and put him into a situation: if he’d worked that way his great characters would have been far less complex than they are. Obviously he starts with the total situation and lets the characters unfold from it, like leaves on a branch, part of the branch but responsive to every tremor of wind that blows over them. (Frye, *On Shakespeare* 4)

Richard’s physical deformity is exaggerated, and his personality becomes more psychopathic. There is no way to know the cause of his physical problems, but, based upon certain key confrontations, his mental deformity could very well have been caused by childhood psychological trauma.

Throughout the play, Richard is verbally abused and humiliated by many different people:
According to Miller’s (1993) detailed exposition, humiliation involves the perception that one has been treated as contemptible or exposed as an inferior or ridiculous person. From an evolutionary perspective, our survival as social beings critically depends on the degree to which valued others accept and respect us, and people will go to extreme lengths to avoid looking weak or foolish—indeed, some will even die to protect their reputation (Miller, 1993). The horror of humiliation, then, derives not simply from its assault on a person's self-esteem, but also from the perceived loss of social status it evokes. (Fitness 80)

Though he is the focal point of the play, internally he is treated as the least in importance. Richard himself adds to the abuse in his own monologues, which indicates that he has internalized what has been said about and to him. As Mardi Horowitz points out, “If repeated or traumatic social and environmental experiences convince a child that he or she is incompetent, damaged self schemas can result. As multiple self schemas develop, some may be used defensively to avoid dreaded states” (*Cognitive Psychodynamics* 111).

In Richard’s case, the defense mechanisms most likely include the aforementioned internalization coupled with avoidance and dissociation. “A study by Watson, Chilton, Fairchild, & Whewell (2006) [. . . found] associations with physical abuse and emotional neglect, with emotional abuse as the strongest predictor of dissociation. Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between severity of trauma and levels of dissociation” (Kaehler 262).

By repeating some of the names and beliefs about his body and character, Richard unconsciously seeks to diffuse the hurt that such ideas can cause him. What he seeks to
avoid is any situation or outward behavior that could lead to more ridicule. He learns to manipulate people (and even himself through delusion) so that he can charm them to his side. The problem is that people are taken in for only so long and are innately suspicious of his motives:

[... ] Richard III is emphatically designed to contain the theatrical aggression within the larger pattern. Richard has to do his savage playing within the net of retributory curses initiated by Margaret; he is their agent, only finally to be subject to them himself. His disruptive energy is also contained by being understood, both as the product of the great family feud Shakespeare has dramatized and as an individual psychology shaped by his physical deformity and the rejection it comes to embody. (Barber and Wheeler 91)

It is not just his physicality that arouses suspicion. Part of their mistrust is because he has become dissociated from them due to the repeated verbal abuse. Richard has become the very thing people have always accused him of being partially because he has internalized the names and labels. As Mark Van Doren puts it, “Richard is never quite human enough” (27). The core instigators of this development have been his own family.

There is no way to gauge the paternal relationship since Richard’s father is dead long before the play opens so the real parental influence comes from Richard’s mother, the Duchess of York. It is obvious that she has shown him very little affection. The mother-child bond is, at best, a weak one. Not having been able to form even that most basic of bonds, Richard struggles to form any kind of real attachments. “Only love without betrayal in that early and crucial phase of our existence will instill that primary
trust which later functions as a sort of platform, foundation, or container and is subsequently permanently interiorized for the difficult process of becoming” (Carotenuto 36). Instead, he approaches all relationships with trepidation and suspicion. “Fearful attachment style is a mistrustful attachment style where the person longs for intimacy but is afraid of being hurt or rejected. Unresolved with preoccupied features describes an attachment style in which the person also seeks an intimate relationship, but is sensitive to a perceived dependency” (Kaehler 261).

It is difficult to say what kind of emotions Richard may have had for his mother when he was younger, but his adult reactions are remote. Richard is also ashamed of his deformities, and his awareness of them is heightened whenever he comes in contact with his family (especially his mother):

Perhaps it is the case that fear at the time of the trauma is involved in the onset of PTSD, but feelings of betrayal in the long term contribute to the maintenance of the disorder. Further, it may be that betrayal is a very complex emotion and participants do not remember understanding the emotion as children. Shame may be a proxy for betrayal, given that it may be a less cognitively and emotionally complex construct. (DePrince 82)

Richard exudes moments of self consciousness that would be painful to watch in another character. Here they seem to come off as an affectation. Perhaps they are because he, in actuality, feels very little, and any emotions he is capable of feeling are most likely negative:

People suffering from emotional numbing may be unable to experience loving feelings toward significant people in their lives. They may have
lost their sense of humor and enjoyment of things they formerly found entertaining. Their emotional palette may consist of a blend of aversive emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger, sadness) interspersed with periods in which they feel nothing at all. (Taylor 14)

Whatever inner emotional life Richard may have, his outer one appears detached and lends itself to an air of play-acting.

It should be noted that Richard gives a clearer indication of his motivations in his monologue in 3 Henry VI 3.2.124-95. Many actor/directors (like Olivier and McKellan) have chosen to incorporate some of these lines into their own productions. How they use the lines (i.e. where they insert them within Richard III) does a great deal to inform the performance as well as clarify Richard’s thoughts. The monologue opens with Richard contemplating the line of men waiting to claim the throne of England. His father has recently been killed and there is a great deal of scrambling for the crown throughout the play. Richard wonders if he even dares to hope that he could one day be king but he sees little else to hope for in his future. For a moment it sounds like he would be glad to live as an “ordinary” man and settle down with a wife. But the idea does not last long since his thoughts fixate upon his deformity:

Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb;

And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,

She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe

To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;

To make an envious mountain on my back,
Where sits deformity to mock my body;
To shape my legs of an unequal size;
To disproportion me in every part,
Like to a chaos, or an unlicked bear whelp
That carries no impression like the dam.
And am I then a man to be beloved? (3.2.153-63)

There are various ways that the last line could be read. On one hand, it echoes with longing and despair. Richard desires what many people want most: to be loved. But he has had very little of that from his own family so it is understandable that he doubts that he could find it elsewhere. On the other hand, the line could be read with a great deal of self-recrimination and disgust for what he sees as weakness (despite his having no control over his outward appearance).

The latter interpretation is more in line with this monologue because he goes on to use it as his reasoning for going after the crown:

O monstrous fault, to harbor such a thought!
Then, since this earth affords no joy to me
But to command, to cheque, to o'erbear such
As are of better person than myself,
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
And, whiles I live, t' account this world but hell,
Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impalèd with a glorious crown. (3.2.164-71)

Richard does not harbor any delusions that his life will be better once his brother has the crown. After all, he was ridiculed and mocked when his father was king, so the only way to make it stop is to become king himself. Richard cannot share these thoughts with anyone but the audience. To even hint that he has deep political designs would be suicidal. So, the social Richard really is play-acting. Never is this more true than when Richard must converse with the Duchess of York, quite possibly because he fears that she will ferret out the truth through some maternal power.

They have very little interaction in the play, but there are two main scenes (out of the four that she appears in) that most likely represent a lifelong pattern of abuse between mother and son.

In the first scene, the Duchess of York disparages Richard before she even sees him on stage. “He is my son, yea, and therein my shame, / Yet from my dugs he drew not this deceit” (2.2.29-30) Here she is referring to the fact that she knows Richard has been trying to deceive Clarence’s children into believing that their other uncle (Edward) is to blame for their father’s death. The Duchess is quick to think ill of Richard and, though she is not erroneous in her assessment, it seems oddly wrong that she is so quick to belittle him to mere children.35

However, it does make more sense later in the scene when she mentions him to Queen Elizabeth after learning that Edward has also died:

Ah, so much interest have I in thy sorrow

35 See Herman 56
As I had title in thy noble husband!

I have bewept a worthy husband's death,

And lived by looking on his images:

But now two mirrors of his princely semblance

Are crack'd in pieces by malignant death,

And I for comfort have but one false glass,

Which grieves me when I see my shame in him.  (2.2.47-54)

Here it is easy to see that the Duchess has never held Richard high in her affections. Why should she when she has had three far worthier men in her life? In her mind, her elder sons resembled their father and because he was such a noble figure, they were as well. Richard is different, and therefore that somehow makes him less than the others. It is almost as if everything good that the Duchess had in her to bestow as a mother was spent upon Edward and Clarence with nothing left over for Richard to have as a worthy claim.

Richard enters and immediately gives his condolences to Queen Elizabeth, but is quick to acknowledge his mother as well:

GLOUCESTER

Sister, have comfort. All of us have cause

To wail the dimming of our shining star;

But none can cure their harms by wailing them.

Madam, my mother, I do cry you mercy;
I did not see your grace: humbly on my knee

I crave your blessing.

DUCHESS OF YORK

God bless thee; and put meekness in thy mind,

Love, charity, obedience, and true duty!

GLOUCESTER

[Aside] Amen; and make me die a good old man!

That is the butt-end of a mother's blessing:

I marvel why her grace did leave it out. (2.2.101-11)

Their interaction is tepid and formal at best. They both seem to be going through the motions of social convention rather than expressing any true affection for each other. Richard’s pondering of the absent phrase highlights the emotional distance. It would seem logical that she would wish her only remaining child a long life. The fact that she neglects to do so means that she is either so distracted by the death of her other sons that she has forgotten the blessing or that she really does not care what happens to Richard. Either reason is enough of an indicator of a lack of maternal sentiment that we need little else to demonstrate a recurring familial neglect. “Living in an environment in which one is exposed to high expressed emotion also can exacerbate PTSD and can hamper the treatment of this disorder (Tarrier & Humphreys, 2004). High expressed emotion is characterized by an environment in which family members are hostile, critical, and overinvolved with the patient’s day-to-day life” (Taylor 38). Their relationship does not completely mirror this diagnosis because the Duchess does not seem overly involved in
Richard’s life. However, she definitely seems to be hostile and critical of him, which is sufficient enough to exacerbate his mental imbalance.

The Duchess speaks ill of him again when Richard is offstage in Act II, Scene 4. She is having a conversation with her young grandson, York, who is relaying some advice that Richard has given him about growing up, “[. . .] ’Ay,’ quoth my uncle Gloucester, / ’Small herbs have grace, great weeds do grow apace:’” (2.4.12-13) This sounds like solid advice that the best things in life grow at a stately pace which could also be taken as a lesson on patience as a virtue. However, instead of acknowledging the wisdom in such guidance and the man who gave it, the Duchess turns it into a moment of belittling Richard once again:

Good faith, good faith, the saying did not hold
In him that did object the same to thee;

He was the wretched'st thing when he was young,

So long a-growing and so leisurely,

That, if this rule were true, he should be gracious. (2.4.16-20)

This statement is the second time that she has spoken ill of Richard to a child. “Shakespeare uses younger persons in a tragic drama like Richard III to highlight the painful contrast between youthful idealism and an older, worldly-wise cynicism that preys upon innocence and destroys it” (Bevington 30). The passage is a very telling bit of information because it shows that she is not above turning younger family members against him. On the one hand it could be said that she is simply protecting the child from blind loyalty to a man who is not worthy of it, but at this point in the play, she has no real
reason to suspect that Richard means the children any harm. But, on the other hand, she could be seen as setting up the children to be obstacles that must be removed because they too harbor a disdain for him. Had they been kept out of the heart of the political intrigue there is a possibility that Richard would not have been so quick to murder them later on.

Even when the Duchess seems to have a clear reason to despise Richard, because of the death of Edward’s two sons, her words to him only emphasize how much she has injured him in the past. It is not clear why she is so convinced that Richard has murdered the princes. Unlike us, she has not been privy to his inner thoughts or his dealings with Tyrrel who carried out the actual murder. However she has come about the information, she is quite quick to believe the worst about Richard: “My damned son, which thy two sweet sons smother’d” (4.4.134). She is determined to confront Richard, but not so she can ask him if he is guilty, rather so that she can accuse him while at the same time continuing to abuse him: “O, she that might have intercepted thee, / By strangling thee in her accurs’d womb / From all the slaughters, wretch, that thou hast done!” (4.4.137-39)

The interesting part of this opening is that she seems to be blaming herself as well, but really is only wishing that he had never been born; she would thus have escaped any cursed tainting.

Richard does nothing to try and defend himself. Instead, his reactions could been seen to be like those of someone who has heard such hostile words before:

A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self. Developmental conflicts
of childhood and adolescence, long since resolved, are suddenly reopened. Trauma forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. (Herman 52)

His responses border on the childish: “A flourish, trumpets! strike alarum, drums! / Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women / Rail on the Lord's anointed: strike, I say!” (4.4.149-51) He would rather drown her (and Queen Elizabeth) out with fanfare than listen to her. He wishes to flee from her in any way that he can because:

Trauma affects all dimensions of behavioral functioning and psychological responses to physical and psychological injuries. The whole person is wounded by trauma [...] Traumatic impact [...] is not only emotionally overwhelming, distressing, and difficult to cope with but also triggers the release of neurohormones and activates ‘fight-or-flight’ readiness.

(Wilson 12)

Richard avoids confrontation for most of the play. “The person afflicted with PTSD over controls his or her emotional responsiveness by preemptive mechanisms to prevent feeling vulnerable to the internal distress of traumatic memory and forms of reexperiencing behavior” (Wilson 25). Yet he is incapable of successfully avoiding a confrontation with his mother. The extent of his threat towards her (drowning out her voice) shows that even though he has been able to get rid of everyone else, he is unable to harm his main aggressor.

In a sense, the Duchess plays the role of Richard’s conscience, but:

He really has no conscience, in a fully developed sense, only fear of retribution. This lack agrees with the stage of emotional development
Shakespeare has inscribed, carefully, indeed systematically, as the psychological basis of his character. Richard lives by sadomasochistic structuring of relationships so as to enforce separateness and autonomy, a pattern shaped by fixation at what Abraham, Freud, and Erikson describe as the biting stage of infantile development. (Barber and Wheeler 110)

This idea of biting is echoed in 3 Henry VI: “‘O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!’ / And so I was, which plainly signified / That I should snarl and bite and play the dog” (5.6.75-77). Richard has internalized all of the horrible things that people have always said about him. As Ian McKellen said, “Richard’s wickedness is an outcome of other people’s disaffection with his physique” (22). Yet, with his mother, he is only able to ineffectually snap at the air.

Perhaps a masochistic streak is why he does not strike her down. He could be using her as a means to keep his feelings of shame alive so that he can maintain his revenge focus. “Research has consistently linked the dispositional tendency to experience shame to decreased empathy for others, increased focus on internal distress, and increased psychopathology (see Tangney et al., 2007)” (Litz et al. 701). Or, Richard could be subconsciously trying to punish himself for whatever guilt he feels for his deeds because “the tendency to experience shame has [also] been associated with remorse, self-condemning thoughts, and lower well-being (Fisher & Exline, 2006), [. . .]” (Litz et al. 701). Either way, she fulfills some kind of need that he does not consciously know he has.

Eventually, he lets the Duchess say the words that he has come to believe are true:

KING RICHARD III
And came I not at last to comfort you?

DUCHESS OF YORK

No, by the holy rood, thou know'st it well,
Thou camest on earth to make the earth my hell.
A grievous burthen was thy birth to me;
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
Thy school-days frightful, desperate, wild, and furious,
Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous,
Thy age confirm'd, proud, subdued, bloody, treacherous.
More mild, but yet more harmful, kind in hatred:
What comfortable hour canst thou name,
That ever graced me in thy company? (4.4.165-75)

Barber and Wheeler believe that:

Even here, her account leaves out – what in life might well be left out –
the mother’s active hatred and rejection of such a child, under the surface
of her effort’s to cope with him. What is left out also is the child’s fear of
violent retaliation by the mother on the pattern of his own violent feelings
toward her. (105)

Richard does feel violence towards her, but it is also a violence that he feels towards
himself. “One threat to the development of a secure attachment with the caregiver is
parental maltreatment” (Kaehler 261). He has so internalized the years of abuse that she has heaped upon him that he is unable to distinguish a difference between what kind of man he should/could be and what kind of man he has been told that he is.

“Psychoanalytic studies of both adults and children suggest that the victim undergoes a process of internalizing the persecutor, and that the pain of experiencing an inner persecutor is part of what turns the former victim into a victimizer” (Simon 82).

In the end, he also victimizes himself by internalizing her final words to him:

Therefore take with thee my most heavy curse;

Which, in the day of battle, tire thee more

Than all the complete armour that thou wear'st!

My prayers on the adverse party fight;

And there the little souls of Edward's children

Whisper the spirits of thine enemies

And promise them success and victory.

Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;

Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend. (4.4.188-96)

It is hard to imagine that he does not stand there with some kind of a sense of horror as she walks away from him. However, any emotions that he may feel at this time are put off by his plans to solidify his reign. It is not until much later that her internalized words come back to haunt him in a literal sense.

Though the ghosts of every one he has been accused of (or admitted to) murdering appear to him in a “dream” sequence, their appearance is very real on the stage. With his mother no longer around, but her words no doubt still ringing in his subconscious mind, Richard’s conscience takes on a different physicality via the ghosts:

Shakespeare creates what amounts to an inescapable external
“conscience,” a cruel and corrupt superego, rooted in infantile dread of maternal wrath, pronouncing vindictive fates that close in on others, who ultimately come to embody them. Although she only appears twice, near the opening and toward the close, she is repeatedly recalled as her curses are fulfilled. (Barber and Wheeler 109)

They all wish him some variation of “despair and die” (5.3.various). This repetition unsettles and unnerves Richard a great deal. His words are wild and confused:

Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.

What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:

Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.

Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:

Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:

Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack. I love myself. Wherefore? for any good

That I myself have done unto myself?

O, no! alas, I rather hate myself

For hateful deeds committed by myself!

I am a villain: yet I lie. I am not.

Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter. (5.3.181-92)

At this moment, Richard is once again a victim, but this time he realizes that it is at the hands of himself and not someone else:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,

And every tale condemns me for a villain.

Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree

Murder, stem murder, in the direst degree;

All several sins, all used in each degree,

Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! guilty!

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;

And if I die, no soul shall pity me:

Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself

Find in myself no pity to myself? (5.3.193-203)
He is no longer able to justify his actions even to himself. He fully realizes just how horrible a person he has become. Richard knows that he should be punished for his crimes and so sets up his own self-fulfilling prophecy: “Methought the souls of all that I had murder'd / Came to my tent; and every one did threat / To-morrow's vengeance on the head of Richard” (5.3.204-206). There is no other way for his story to end.

*Richard III* is the embodiment of the various emotions that can revolve around acts of betrayal. It may not seem like ridicule and humiliation could be enough to cause someone to feel betrayed but “Theoretically, any kind of relational transgression may be appraised by relationship partners as a betrayal, depending on the extent to which relational expectations and trust have been violated” (Fitness 78). A sense of betrayal is especially deep seated if the actions causing the emotions are caused by people who are supposed to be allies. “As De Paulo and Kashy pointed out, people's reports of what they value most in their close relationships revolve around issues of authenticity and the ability to reveal their true selves to someone who can be counted on not to betray their trust” (Fitness 79). Richard does not have anyone with whom he can truly be himself because he has learned that such closeness can only perpetuate his humiliation. This leads to him experiencing a gamut of different emotions:

Specifying the kinds of emotions that one may experience in response to betrayal is not just an academic exercise because different emotions motivate different kinds of behaviors and therefore play a major role in the progress of the interpersonal betrayal script. Anger, for example, typically tend to motivate confrontation and engagement with the offending party, whereas hate
tends to motivate avoidance or emotional withdrawal (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). Jealousy, with its complex blends of emotions, may motivate behaviors from anxious clinging to depressed rumination and brooding, to angry confrontation or revenge (Sharpsteen, 1991; van Sommers, 1988). (Fitness 82)

Richard does not exhibit every single reaction to these various emotions, but he certainly does manifest quite a few (brooding, revenge, etc). These ideas give him a much more complex personality than simply saying that he is evil. It is true that he commits some incredibly heinous and villainous acts. Richard must accept responsibility for these, but, emotionally, he is just a man who is responding in ways that he has been conditioned to do so.
CHAPTER 6
IPHIGÉNIE

Parent/Child

Racine strove to make his characters less idealized versions of those found in the myths and Euripides’s plays. The need for a sacrifice so that the Greeks could go to war may be the focal point, but it is truly the characters who drive the action of the play through their relationships and individual reactions:

War in Greek tragedy, especially in Euripides, over time becomes more and more associated with the image of sacrifice. Our children become sacrificial animals upon the altar in order to achieve some goal, a goal whose ultimate worth begins to be questioned. The theme of sacrifice and the implicit theme of the scapegoat become important both in Greek tragedy and in tragedy as a whole. An examination of these notions sheds further light on the portrayal of family relationships within tragedy.

(Simon 21)

Roland Barthes points out how Racine specifically manages family and sacrifice in *Iphigénie*:

All these persons (for genuinely individual claims are at stake) are agitated, at odds or more particularly associated within a reality that is in fact the central character of the play: the family. In *Iphigénie* there is an
intense family life. In no other play has Racine presented a family so solidly constituted, provided with a complete nucleus (father, mother, daughter), with collaterals (Helen, around whom the dispute rages), relatives (husband and wife hurl them at each other), and an imminent alliance (the ‘rights’ of the future son-in-law are hotly argued). Obviously, in this solid bloc entirely preoccupied by a great material interest, Ériphyle (that is, the tragic hero) is really the intruder, whom all will sacrifice [. . .] to the success of the clan. (Barthes 114-15)

At first we believe that Iphigénie is the sacrificial scapegoat (as she is in most other versions). After all, she is supposed to be the focal point of the play. However, the catch is that Agamemnon’s daughter does not have to be the real sacrifice. The importance is only partially in who she is (a royal daughter). The real emphasis is in her name. So, Racine saves Agamemnon’s Iphigénie by having Helen’s Iphigénie, known throughout as Ériphile, be the true victim and sacrifice.

What makes Racine’s Iphigénie a unique choice for analysis in terms of betrayal trauma is how the main character reacts when she learns that her father has deceived her. Iphigénie has been raised in a very loving and supportive home. She has not had to endure years of obvious abuse like Richard. Iphigénie’s story is interesting because we get to witness the traumatic reactions of a previously untroubled character that run parallel to one, Ériphile, who has felt nothing but heartache her entire life.

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The play opens with Agamemnon in a state of distress over the fact that the oracle has decreed that the warships will not be able to move unless Iphigénie is sacrificed on Diana’s altar. Agamemnon declares that he refused at first:

    Surpris, comme tu peux penser,
    
    Je sentis dans mon corps tout mon sang se glacer,
    
    Je demeurai sans voix, et n'en repris l'usage,
    
    Que par mille sanglots qui se firent passage.
    
    Je condamnai les Dieux, et sans plus rien ouïr,
    
    Fis voeu sur leurs autels de leur désobéir.  (1.1.63-68)

[Think how the blow stunned me. Ah!

I felt each drop of blood freeze in my veins.

I could not speak. My voice came back to me

Only when fits of sobbing forced a way.

I cursed the gods, and, deaf to further pleas,

Vowed on their altars never to obey.  (1.1.63-68)]

These actions sound like those of a loving father who fears for the life of his child. However, as he continues to speak, it does not sound like it took long for him to be convinced otherwise. Ulysse reminded Agamemnon that the cause is too just to be forsaken and that Agamemnon should not be too hasty to throw away all of the power that he has achieved. So, “Je me rendis, Arcas, et vaincu par Ulysse, / De ma Fille en pleurant j’ordonnai le supplice.  (1.1.89-90) [“I yielded, Arcas, to Ulysses, and / In tears
gave orders for my daughter's death” (1.1.89-90).] However, once alone, he begins to rethink that decision and goes back to not wanting to sacrifice his daughter.

This wavering resolve is the heart of the tragedy because:

The tension between “why continue?” and “continue!” is an intricate one, for the acts of betrayal, the crimes, including the murder of children, are somehow committed in the name of continuing and enhancing the line, or at least enhancing one line over another. Should Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, a part of his house, in order to fight the Trojan War and thus preserve his house? Should Agamemnon kill the children of Troy and many of the children of Greece, “the flower of Greece,” in order to propagate his house and perpetuate his rule? (Simon 3)

On an emotional and human level the answer is an easy negative. But Agamemnon is driven by more than these things and his lust for power is enough to overrule his sense of parental/familial obligation. “The mental activity used to prevent unwanted arousals of emotion is defensive in nature. Such defenses can be adaptive in that they prevent the danger of emotional flooding, but they can also be maladaptive because they prevent a full recognition of ideas and can blunt the possibilities for solutions to difficult problems” (Horowitz, *Cognitive Psychodynamics* 59). Agamemnon’s vacillation causes him to be unable to seek out viable alternative solutions. He is also morally weak and easy to persuade depending upon who is doing the argument.

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38 This is supported by Cairncross in Racine, *Iphigenia* 33-4.
The father is a false god. His being is based on having; he possesses everything: wealth, honors, power, alliances, but in terms of character he has nothing; his praxis is oblique [. . .]. His hesitations have no reference to the division of the tragic hero; in him, it is not even paternal love and national duty that are in conflict, but rather public pressures, those voices responsible for what people say, so powerful in the Racinian universe: in favor of the sacrifice weigh not the gods, but the advantages of an expedition whose profit is not quite concealed by its glory; against the sacrifice, there is, of course, a paternal feeling (Agamemnon is not a monster, but a mediocre man, an average soul), but this sentiment constantly requires the reinforcement or the resistance of others. (Barthes 113-14)

Even though he is somewhat malleable to the influence of others, Agamemnon alone bears the responsibility for his choices because he is the one in the position of power.

This attitude is what separates this version from its predecessors because the entire plot is driven by humanity rather than the divine:

It is claimed in *Iphigénie* he [Racine] wished to restrict the action to the interplay of human wills, cutting out the marvellous and admitting the oracle only as a preliminary datum. *Iphigénie* would be, according to this conception, a ‘purely human’ play, from which the gods are absent since they serve only to ravel and unravel the action, and since all that happens in it conforms to probability and good sense. (Vinaver 48-49)
The actions in the play become believable because we can more easily see and understand the struggle. Because there is no active divine influence, Agamemnon becomes the ultimate decision maker on what will happen, and his fear of the outcome, no matter what he decides, is very real. “At every moment, in each of the scenes in which Agamemnon figures, the tragic myth keeps close to and explains the human drama, and in the refusal to let the gods appear, one feels a respect which little by little, as it grows, becomes tinged with terror” (Vinaver 49). According to Racine, his dual nature is what makes Agamemnon a good tragic character. In this sense, Agamemnon is also a traumatic victim because he is so morally conflicted:

Moral conflict and dissonance arguably creates severe peri- or post-event emotional distress (e.g., shame and guilt), which causes motivation to avoid various cues that serve as reminders of the experience. Although functional in the short run, avoidance thwarts corrective learning experiences (e.g., learning that the world is not always an amoral place, that the person can do good things, that others still accept them), maintaining the negative psychosocial impact of moral conflict. (Litz et al. 698)

However, it is difficult to have sympathy for Agamemnon because he helps perpetuate the victimized role through his constant indecisiveness.

It is easier to sympathize with him in Aeschylus’s Agamemnon where he is a true victim. But in this play:

Clinically, it is an illusion that the sacrifice of one member of a family or society can preserve the group and establish a new equilibrium. The act
generates so much guilt, desire for revenge, and dread about who may be
sacrificed next that there is a propensity to commit violent extrusion again
whenever a new threat arises, from within or outside the family. The
sacrifice of one member invites repetition of traumatic sacrifice.” (Simon
24)\textsuperscript{39}

Another reason that we have very little sympathy for Racine’s Agamemnon is that he
exacerbates the situation through deceit and lies.

Agamemnon has sent for Iphigénie under the guise that she will be wed to Achille
who has no knowledge of the duplicity (1.1.91-96). Part of the reason for the charade is
that Achille is in love\textsuperscript{40} with Iphigénie and would never go along with the sacrifice.
Agamemnon could be hoping Achille will save her. However, instead of waiting to see if
that will happen, he sends someone to turn her away (1.1.142-52). Agamemnon wants to
save face just as much as he wants to save his daughter. He would rather use Achille as a
dupe, without thinking about what kind of harm that could cause or what will happen
when the truth is revealed (because it is inevitable that it will be).

When he learns that Arcas has failed to keep mother and daughter away from the
camp, Agamemnon bows down to what he sees as the will of the gods, “Seigneur, de mes
efforts je connais l'impuissance. / Je cède, et laisse aux Dieux opprimer l'innocence, / La

\begin{flushright}
Seigneur, de mes efforts je connais l'impuissance. / Je cède, et laisse aux Dieux opprimer l'innocence, / La
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{39} See also Freud’s “Totem and Taboo.”

\textsuperscript{40} He openly declares his love several times throughout the play (like in 2.2.744:
“Vous m'en voyez encore épris plus que jamais” [“You see me more than ever deep in
love”]).
Victime bientôt marchera sur vos pas,” (1.5.389-91). [“My lord, I know my efforts are in vain. / I yield. Let heaven oppress the innocent. / Soon will the victim follow where you lead” (1.5.389-91).] By calling on the gods, Agamemnon is dissociating himself from the sacrifice and repressing the culpability of his involvement:

Repression and dissociation are often seen as two separate defenses. One way they are distinguished is in terms of time: Dissociation is a real-time defense in which consciousness is not fully engaged on the event at hand; repression is an after-the-fact defense in which memory for the event is in some way impaired. (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 106-107)

Agamemnon believes he is not in control of the situation. However, the gods are a mere convenience because they are easy to blame for what he will allow to happen and calling on them also allows him to claim the role of victim.

When Agamemnon and Iphigénie finally see each other, he is unable to tell her about the sacrifice. Indeed, it would be a hard thing for any father to reveal such a cruel fate after having been greeted with these words:

Que cette amour m’est chère!

Quel plaisir de vous voir, et de vous contempler,

Dans ce nouvel éclat dont je vous vois briller!

Quels honneurs! Quel pouvoir! Déjà la Renommée

Par d’étonnants récits m’en avait informée.

Mais que voyant de près ce spectacle charmant,

Je sens croître ma joie et mon étonnament!
Dieux! Avec quel amour la Grèce vous révère!

Quel bonheur de me voir la Fille d'un tel Père! (2.2.538-46)

[How dear this love!

With what delight I feed my eyes on you

In all your gleaming new magnificence!

What power! What honours! Many-tongued renown

Had told me of them in prodigious tales.

But how, as I behold this splendid sight,

Do my delight and my amazement grow!

With what affection Greece reveres you, Sire!

What fortune to be such a father's child! (2.2.538-46)]

Iphigénie obviously loves her father dearly. The fact that Racine also has her point out his high station only further complicates the matter because it shows that she is aware that he is not simply a father, though in a few lines she does ask, “Hé ! mon Père, oubliez votre rang à ma vue. / Je prévois la rigueur d'un long éloignement. / N'osez-vous sans rougir être Père un moment?” [“Ah! father dear, forget your rank with me. / The long, long parting will be hard to bear. / Dare you not be a father for a time?” (2.2.558-60)]

Obviously he cannot acquiesce to such a wish because to do so would be a disaster. Agamemnon cannot reveal the plan nor can he find it in himself to warn her and quickly flees her presence.
Iphigénie is clearly puzzled and upset by his manner, but is soon enlightened. Though she has been seriously betrayed, Iphigénie is also the one person who seems to see the bigger picture of what is happening and even defends Agamemnon to the vengeful Achille (3.4.1001-20). Iphigénie is incapable of believing that her father is not deeply troubled by the gods’s edict. However, she once again recognizes that he is not simply a father and that there are other things that move him. So, of all of them, Iphigénie is the one person who understands her father and his situation best. She does not condemn him, but believes that she will be able to dissuade him from going through with her sacrifice.

Iphigénie rushes into a state of denial and blind trust that the disaster can yet be avoided. The denial is part of the Stress Response Pattern, as explained by John P. Wilson (26-30). It is a natural reaction to any kind of traumatic situation. Iphigénie cannot help but believe that she will be able to persuade her father to think of his family first. She needs the numbness that goes along with the denial:

Emotional regulation is sharply increased, feelings are dampened, and a sense of numbing occurs. The stressed person can, for a while, experience only a dim memory of the traumatic incident or deny certain personal implications. Key topics and potential emotional responses are sometimes omitted from conscious thought. During these states, some people experience a sense of strange identity, depersonalization, or dissociation. (Horowitz, *Cognitive Psychodynamics* 20)
By successfully giving in to the denial, Iphigénie has managed to depersonalize the situation. It is not about her, but about what the gods have decreed, though she does not understand why they have chosen her as the candidate.

Iphigénie believes that the way to win her life is not through threats because Agamemnon is the reason for her existence and he therefore has a right to say what will happen to it (4.4.1174-84). She truly accepts this fact because she loves her father and believes in him. However, because she is human and does not want to die, she pleads for her life by asking him to think of what her death will mean for Achille and Clytemnestre (4.4.1211-20):

> With restraint, but also with subtle cruelty, she pleads for her life, not for her own sake but for that of a mother and a fiancé. Agamemnon, his ruses laid bare, has no choice but to admit the truth. But, he pleads, he has tried his utmost to save her, and has every time been thwarted by the maleficence of the gods. Besides, even if he wanted, the army would revolt against a refusal to make the necessary sacrifice. (Cairncross in Racine, *Iphigenia* 37)

She cannot bear to have them so distraught over the thought of losing her when it is something that should be avoidable. Agamemnon is almost persuaded by her despite asking her to do what he cannot. If she willingly sacrifices herself then she will become a martyr and save her family’s (namely Agamemnon’s) honor. He would like to believe that she accepts it of her own free will and in doing so will lessen the blow of her death:

> In particular, betrayers tend to minimize the harm they have caused, whereas the betrayed tend to maximize their own suffering (Baumeister,
Thus, the betrayed party perceives that more pain and suffering is "owing" than the betrayer believes is fair and reasonable, and this perceptual mismatch leads to escalating cycles of revenge and counter-revenge (Kim & Smith, 1993). (Fitness 86-87)

Or, in this case, imbalance leads to a cycle of argument and counter-argument. Still, he has hesitated while talking with her and since his resolve has wavered for the entire play, it is possible that she will win. However, for some reason (possibly dramatic suspense), Racine chooses to silence her and let Cytemnestre and Achille pick up the argument (4.7.1425-32).

They almost completely destroy any hesitation that Agamemnon feels:

The Mother and the son-in-law, in league, represent a contrary ideology: the claim of the individual against a tyrannical state. Both insist that the ‘person’ is a sufficient value, and that consequently the vendetta is obsolete: for Clytemnestra and Achilles, transgression is no longer contagious; it is illogical that the whole family should pay for Helen’s abduction. This claim is reinforced by its own self-righteousness.

(Barthes 112)

Earlier on, Iphigénie realized that if Achille were allowed to confront her father, he would do the situation more harm than good. She was definitely correct because their impassioned and threatening pleas only serve to strengthen Agamemnon’s resolve to sacrifice Iphigénie. As with the gods, their indignation only gives Agamemnon someone on whom he can place the blame. He has found a more earthly scapegoat in Achille.

“Left alone, no longer affected by his daughter's plea, Agamemnon takes a hard line. To
spare her life would seem like surrendering to Achilles' bluster” (Cairncross in Racine, *Iphigenia* 38). Still, once alone with time to think, Iphigénie does ultimately win the argument because Agamemnon finally realizes that he truly cannot sacrifice her.

However, though it is theatrically pleasing that the tragedy has been avoided, not sacrificing Iphigénie goes too much against outcome of the well-known story. There are actually two common endings to the story: 1) Iphigenia is killed as a sacrifice or 2) Artemis saves her at the last minute and substitutes an animal (usually a deer) in her place and Iphigenia is transported to Tauris to be a priestess. The latter choice would have allowed Racine a chance to save Iphigenia, but it would also have meant that he needed to actively involve at least one of the gods (even if done offstage). Instead he chose a much more obscure version of the story that claimed there was another Iphigenia who would satisfy the sacrificial requirements. (See Racine’s Preface to the play.)

Racine solves this problem with Ériphile. Throughout the play no one knows who she truly is: Helen’s long-lost daughter who was named Iphigénie at birth. This twist conveniently comes out at the very end of the play and she sacrifices herself in place of the other Iphigénie:

> Agamemnon, then, escapes against all the odds. He is neither compelled to send his daughter to her death nor to suffer the humiliation of calling off the expedition. By the same token, the gentle heroine, whose fortunes have moved the spectator so deeply, emerges unscathed and links her destiny with that of the chivalrous Achilles. (Cairncross in Racine, *Iphigenia* 40)

Ériphile is actually the true tragic hero of this play despite the fact that she is not a very agreeable character (an antihero):
Aristote, bien éloigné de nous demander des héros parfaits, veut au contraire que les personnages tragiques, c’est-à-dire ceux dont le malheur fait la catastrophe de la tragédie, ne soient ni tout à fait bons, ni tout à fait méchants. [...] Il faut donc qu’ils aient une bonté médiocre, c’est-à-dire une vertu capable de faiblesses, et qu’ils tombent dans le malheur par quelque faute qui les fasse plaindre sans les faire détester. (Racine, *Oeuvres*)

[And Aristotle, far from demanding perfect heroes of us, on the contrary wants tragic characters (that is, those whose misfortune causes the catastrophe of the tragedy) to be neither completely good nor completely evil. [...] they must be moderately good, – that is, good but capable of weakness – and they should fall into misfortune through some error that makes us pity rather than hate them. (Racine, “First Preface to Andromache” 253)]

She spends much of her time bemoaning her fate and pining after Achille. Yet she is important for a reason other than as a handy sacrificial substitution: she is the outward manifestation of Iphigénie’s trauma.

Ériphile’s entire life was spent going through one traumatic experience after another. Her mother abandoned her (and thus she grew up in a cloud of betrayal), her homeland was ravaged and she was taken prisoner, she fell in love with her captor only to lose him to another woman, and in the end she finds herself about to be killed so that another can be saved. Before that last can happen, she chooses to do what Agamemnon implored Iphigénie to do, she thinks of her noble birth and decides to live up to the honor
by sacrificing herself (5.6.1772-78). While Ériphile has no laws that she must respect in the instance of her sacrifice, she still chooses the same noble path that Iphigénie would have selected. Of course, she is also irrevocably ending her own suffering, but the gesture comes off as noble.

For some theorists, the play is not a tragedy because Agamemnon’s daughter survives:

This type of ending is something of a novelty in Racine, whose previous plays had usually culminated in disaster. For Iphigenia is a tragedy in name only; in structure and spirit, it tends to revert to the tragi-comedy, so popular earlier in the century, to the romanesque play with its aggressively noble, declamatory hero and its complicated plot – guided by a kindly Providence to a happy ending. (Cairncross in Racine, Iphigenia 40)

However, the play is very much a tragedy because Ériphile loses her life for a cause that is not her own. Just because the war is begun over her mother does not mean that Ériphile should be the one to pay with her life, but the nature of the stories demands a sacrifice of some sort.

Ériphile’s death is both satisfactory and dissatisfying at the same time. It is satisfactory because it allows a beloved character to find a happy ending, but it is the opposite for the very same reason. Iphigénie’s rescue in this manner makes the play end on too high a note for any cathartic response to take place within the audience:

The stake of all this agitation is Iphigenia. Linked to Eriphyle by a similarity of situation, Iphigenia is her symmetrical opposite: Eriphyle is nothing, Iphigenia has everything; Agamemnon’s daughter, she
participates like him in the world of total Possession. She is provided with celebrated parents, countless allies, a devoted lover; she has virtue, appeal, purity. In her there is nothing unmotivated; her love is the product of an accumulation of causes: she is the creature of good conscience. Though the gods pretend to condemn her, she is always on their side, and even her death is a profound assent to the providential order: her death is just, that is, justified, assigned a purpose, incorporated into an exchange economy, like a soldier’s death. (Barthes 100)

However, the joy could be eclipsed and catharsis achieved by Ériphile’s tragic existence and demise if the audience has come to see her as a kind of shadow Iphigénie. Her actions within the play may be less than honorable until the end, but they are understandable given the life she has had. And, like Iphigénie, Ériphile is limited in what actions she can ultimately perform.

At the end of the play, “La seule Iphigénie / Dans ce commun bonheur pleure son Ennemie (5.6.789-90) [Alone, / Your daughter weeps over her enemy (5.6.1790)]. So, even though she knows that Ériphile was no true friend, Iphigénie cannot help but be saddened by her death. It could be because she loved her as a friend, or that she has in truth lost her cousin, or both:

Iphigénie is a ‘great dramatic comedy’ in which Blood is no longer a tribal bond, but merely a family one, a simple continuity of advantages and affections. The critical consequence is that we can no longer reduce the roles among themselves, attempt to reach the singular nucleus of the
configuration; we must take them one after the other, define what each of them represents socially and no longer mythically. (Barthes 108)

“For Racine, as indeed for most of the French theorists of his time, what matters is another type of probability; whether the characters and situations are authentic or fictitious, the task is to create the belief that they could have existed” (Vinaver 4-5). Ériphile's death also serves as a warning to be mindful of how actions and decisions can affect others. A betrayal may not always lead to death, but it will always lead to pain.
CHAPTER 7

KING LEAR

Parent/Child

Of all the plays, King Lear’s parent-child relationships are likely the most accessible to audiences. Strip away the noble political intrigue and this play is simply the tale of two troubled families. They could be found in any time and in any setting. The characters’s actions and reactions mainly come from a very self-centered position. Lear’s desire to be loved and adored above all others is the catalyst that throws the play’s intrigue into motion, but it is the various familial betrayals that really tie everything into a tragic whole. As if to emphasize this point, Shakespeare gives us two families that almost perfectly mirror each other even as their individual plots intertwine. Each family is led by an elderly patriarchal figure whose desires clash with those of his children, much to the detriment of all.

The first parent-child betrayal is actually the least extreme though the reactions of the injured parent are most certainly that and more. Lear has devised a scheme whereby he can preen under the adoration of his daughters and at the same time set up his kingdom’s future. He is quite certain of the outcome and has already planned it out despite the fact that he seems to be setting up a kind of contest: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge” (1.1.51-53). His elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, are quite happy to
play the game and try to one-up each other. But his favorite, his youngest daughter, Cordelia, seems at a loss as to how to proceed.

Cordelia purposefully separates herself from her sisters. It is clear that the dynamic is two against one. The reason behind this is not totally clear, but part of it most likely comes from the fact that she is clearly Lear’s favorite: “Now, our joy, / Although the last, not least” (1.1.82-83). Goneril could reasonably expect that title (“joy”) since she is the eldest, but he does not afford her any affectionate term when he first addresses her. She is simply “Goneril, / Our eldest-born” (1.1.53-54). Regan would naturally expect and accept the sibling rivalry, but at least Lear offers her some affection, “Our dearest Regan [...].” (1.1.68). However, it is interesting to note that her husband is also mentioned right after that: “[... ] wife to Cornwall” (1.1.68). Goneril was allowed some independence in her address, but Regan is reminded that there are others with whom she must compete as well. By mentioning Cornwall, it is clear that Lear is also letting him know that he is the preferred son-in-law over Goneril’s Albany.

Lear only mentions Albany in direct connection to Goneril when he declares her portion “to thine and Albany’s issue / Be this perpetual” (1.1.66). The phrasing almost sounds as though Albany were an afterthought. In the beginning of the scene, Kent and Gloucester believe that it is the other way around, but Lear also seems to prefer Cornwall earlier in the scene when he addresses both men: “Our son of Cornwall, / And you, our no less loving son of Albany” (1.1.41-42). It almost sounds as though he is mentioned simply because he is in the same room. Since Lear seems to be a terrible judge of character (and possibly because Albany comes across as weak and ineffectual in the beginning), it is quite possible that he does prefer Cornwall to Albany though the latter is
actually the more faithful and honorable of the two men. This byplay shows that Lear has a tendency to set up rivalries amongst those around him so it is not surprising that he would expect the same from his children:

Or the sisters could be motivated most acutely by their family relationships. Their volatile and needy father has ruptured the family inexorably. Lear planned for his ‘kind nursery’ with Cordelia, his mother-daughter. She begins to ‘mother’ him by correcting his unreasonable demands for love, especially since he insists on her marriage. Her sisters continue this ‘mothering’ in subsequent scenes, but Lear has another kind of mother in mind, one who will indulge his fantasies and love him ‘all.’ These women are set against one another throughout the play by the self-centered love of their father. Cordelia, young, naive, direct, righteous, and judgmental, leaves the play at this point, not a saint or sinner, but a woman caught in the strictures of the patriarchal family. (Kordecki 75)

Cordelia is unsure of how to appease both her father and herself: “[Aside] Then poor Cordelia! / And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's / More richer than my tongue” (1.1.76-78). Whether she simply refuses to be disingenuous or she really is bad at eloquent speech, Cordelia tells Lear that she simply has “nothing” (1.1.87) to say.

With some prodding, she does manage a little bit more: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less” (1.1.91-93). “Cordelia’s resistance is not merely to his demand for flattery but, as she makes clear, to his underlying demand for a continuation of the total relationship of child to parent [. . .]” (Barber and Wheeler 285). It is doubtful that
Cordelia believes that she is betraying Lear so much as being truthful. Still, with a little more thought, she could have found a way to appease both of them. She could simply have left off that last part, but it is doubtful that Lear would have accepted a more lovingly phrased response because he expects her to say more. Cordelia does try to explain her position to him:

Good my lord,

You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I

Return those duties back as are right fit,

Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say

They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,

That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry

Half my love with him, half my care and duty:

Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,

To love my father all. (1.1.95-104)

Cordelia does not hesitate to remind her father that he will have to compete for her affections with her future husband. She also manages to rebuke her sisters for neglecting to mention their own spouses, even though Lear himself mentioned the men before asking the women to compete:

Cordelia has certainly some responsibility for the conflict. She is both instructing Lear on the folly of his love ‘test’ and voicing her disapproval
of her sisters for granting Lear’s ill-conceived request. Here, Cordelia thinks that her sisters’ acquiescence has made her task that much more difficult. If they too would have refused Lear’s demand, she could have parlayed her father’s care differently. As it is, to prove her worth and love, she needs to distance herself from Goneril’s and Regan’s protestations of devotion. Her politically and personally naive self-righteousness haunts her throughout the play. (Kordecki 66)

This line of thinking shows a big difference between the youngest and her older siblings.

Cordelia believes that she speaks honestly for the good of them both:

But truth is not the only obligation in the world, nor is the obligation to tell truth the only obligation. The matter here was to keep it inviolate, but also to preserve a father. And even if truth were the one and only obligation, to tell much less than truth is not to tell it. And Cordelia’s speech not only tells much less than truth about her love, it actually perverts the truth when it implies that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father.

(Bradley 295)

She manages to express herself in such a way that Lear inevitably feels betrayed. Plus, Cordelia has two suitors waiting to see who will win her hand and so she must consider what such a union means because:

[. . .] marriage brings with it new obligations and loyalties [. . .] . The sadness is that Lear [. . .] cannot see the wisdom and necessity of this.

Cordelia has promised him half her love, and she means to abide by that agreement. That is enough; that is what a reasonable observer (Kent, for
example) might call ‘natural’. But it is not enough to satisfy Lear’s self-blinded feelings of entitlement to all. (Bevington 195-96)

However, Cordelia could have found some way to reassure Lear at the same time. Instead, she chooses to phrase things in such a way that rebukes her sisters for kowtowing and admonishes Lear for desiring such behavior. “Lear does not understand that authority and affection rest on a complex and subtle matrix of obligation, power, loyalty, reciprocal need, and love. None of these is absolute” (Simon 107). Cordelia may be honest, but she ends up hurting Lear’s feelings and pride so much that, in a moment of pique, a reverse betrayal happens rather quickly.

The fault for the situation once again falls to Lear, but he does not see it that way. He does not recognize that he has put too much pressure on Cordelia for her to answer him as he wishes:

King Lear [ . . . ] is centered in a father’s love for a daughter who has become a woman. But Lear never relinquishes his longing for Cordelia “to love [her] father all.” The “holy cords” of family bonds, made sacred by the intensity of the need Lear seeks to fulfill in Cordelia (and made diabolical in response to his demand on them by Regan and Goneril), do prove “too intrinse t’ unloose.” What Lear seeks in Cordelia is from the beginning a fulfillment that can only be achieved, as it eventually is, by the sacrifice of her womanhood to his need for her. (Barber and Wheeler 38)

Instead of truly hearing what she has to say, he fixates upon the fact that she will not pander to him. “The most obvious symptom of Lear’s insanity, especially in its first
stages, is of course the domination of a fixed idea. Whatever presents itself to his senses, is seized on by this idea and compelled to express it [. . .]” (Bradley 265). Lear proves that emotion is the true ruler by abjuring Cordelia and punishing her with banishment:

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 [. . .] . (1.1.113-16)

Kent is the only one who tries to defend her, but he is quickly overridden:

Peace, Kent!

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

I loved her most, and thought to set my rest

On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight!

So be my grave my peace, as here I give

Her father's heart from her! (1.1.121-26)

It is because he does love Cordelia so much that her seemingly callous words cause him such pain, and his immediate reaction is to hurt her in equal measure. “His disappointment in Cordelia is in proportion to how much he had counted on her to be, in return for his love for her, the nurse of his old age” (Simon 107).

Lear, to emphasize the point that he will brook no argumentation, banishes Kent for trying to speak the truth of the situation. This expulsion is a small tragedy in itself because Kent is utterly loyal to Lear. It is possible that the king has always been wary of
such devotion. “It is also tragic, and all too common, when a fear of trust limits intimate relationships between trustworthy individuals. This fear of trusting is a kind of betrayal blindness without the betrayal. The person is unwilling to look, for fear of finding betrayal. Thus, the blindness serves to protect the relationship, but at the price of intimacy” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 195). Because there is a lack of true friendly intimacy between them, Lear is unwilling to accept Kent’s words as anything but treasonous and so does, in fact, end up betraying his friend in truth by banishing him.

At this point, he does not realize how much it will harm him to ostracize his two most loyal subjects. By separating himself from them, he strips himself of too much power and support because he has already given over his kingship to Goneril and Regan:

> The initial act of the hero is his only act; the remainder is passion. An old and weary king, hungry for rest, banishes the one daughter who would give it to him and plunges at once into the long, loud night of his catastrophe. An early recognition of his error does not save him [. . .]. Henceforth King Lear is a man more acted against than active; the deeds of the tragedy are suffered rather than done; the relation of events is lyrical instead of logical, musical instead of moral. (Van Doren 204)

He trusts that Goneril and Regan are just as honest and loyal as Cordelia and Kent, but that belief only sets him up for a kind of self betrayal.

As for Cordelia, she makes a match with the King of France who is quick to come to her defense against Lear and Burgundy (her other suitor) and assure her of his feelings. At the same time as he is comforting Cordelia, he is also calling Lear and Burgundy fools for being willing to toss aside someone like her. With such love and loyalty so quickly
offered it is not surprising that Cordelia never really shows much pain over her father’s betrayal. She escapes everything relatively unscathed (at least outwardly):

From a social vantage point, then, the daughter is freed from family ties for another kind of allegiance, a new object of love, apart from parents. In religious terms, the rite works to keep separate the divine from the human, to avoid misplaced worship. Looked at psychologically, the ritual works, when it works, to avoid fixation or regression. . . . These perspectives come together when we consider that the genesis of worship is in the family constellation, as are the prototypes for sexual love. Lear overrides social, religious, and psychological dimensions of the marriage rite as the need for a maternal presence is shifted for the first time in Shakespeare’s drama onto daughters. (Barber and Wheeler 284-85)

However, Lear has no such buffer for his emotions. He tries to set up Goneril and Regan as substitutes, but fails miserably because they care very little for him.

As soon as everyone has departed, the two sisters agree that they need to think about how best to handle Lear. It is quite clear that his behavior towards Cordelia and Kent has only solidified their observations of “the infirmity of his age” (1.1.296). According to them, Lear has always been difficult and callous, but they fear that he will become even more so now that he is old:

The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engraffed
condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness
that infirm and choleric years bring with them. (1.1.298-302)

At this point in the play, such speculation could be accepted as the natural concern that children have when their parents have reached an age where the caretaker role is reversed. Despite Cordelia’s earlier harsh words to her sisters intimating their duplicity and callousness (1.1.311-19/25-7), there is little in this tête-à-tête to imply anything devious. However, it is important to note because it shows that they expect Lear to be difficult and that there is a willingness between the two to act in concert against him.

It does not take long for Goneril and Regan to show their true disdain for Lear. He is supposed to spend half a year with each of the households. As expected, Lear has been rather difficult:

   By day and night he wrongs me; every hour
   He flashes into one gross crime or other,
   That sets us all at odds: I'll not endure it:
   His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
   On every trifle [. . .] . (1.3.4-8)

No doubt it has been hard for him to adjust to not being king and head of his household. Couple that with what seems to be the possible beginning of dementia and his rowdy retinue of knights, it is understandable that Goneril would become frustrated. However, it does not seem as though she is really willing to try and find some way to satisfy them both. Instead, she devises a plan (that Regan agrees to) that will slowly strip Lear of any remaining power and support that he has.
In a way, Goneril’s reaction echoes Cordelia’s behavior in the beginning because neither daughter really tries to find a way to make everyone happy. Like Lear, they lack the ability to truly compromise.

Lear is obviously less than pleased by the demand. He begins to rave and say horrible things to her like “Degenerate bastard!” and “Detested kite!” (1.4.251/261). These names are far worse than anything he said to Cordelia, but, then again, he had power at the time to actually punish her in another way. He has no such ability now since the only thing he has left is his retinue. He thinks about Cordelia, and that causes him to realize that what she had done is nothing compared to what Goneril is trying to do:

Pathological grief, unresolved mourning over separation and loss, reveals what is entailed in ordinary acceptance of such losses. Lear refuses to weep, but he can rage. […] His rage at his inability to control the progression of life from womb to tomb and to mold his own children teaches us what we must, albeit with great difficulty, accept as beyond our power, though not as beyond our wishes. (Simon 105)

Goneril’s claims enrage him so much that he starts to physically attack himself: [He strikes his head] “Beat at this gate that let thy folly in / and thy dear judgement out” (1.4.284-85). These actions only serve to strengthen Goneril’s claims that he is unstable. Lear disowns Goneril just as he had Cordelia and turns to Regan. He is, of course, unaware that Regan is in on the scheme and will further seek to shake his manhood (1.4.296).
Lear complains to Regan about Goneril’s treatment, but she is not very sympathetic. Like Goneril, Regan reminds Lear about how old he is and advises him to return to her sister:

O, sir, you are old.

Nature in you stands on the very verge

Of her confine: you should be ruled and led

By some discretion, that discerns your state

Better than you yourself. Therefore, I pray you,

That to our sister you do make return;

Say you have wrong’d her, sir. (2.4.146-52)

If we did not know the joint plot against him her advice would seem sound and fair. Lear admits that he is old and does something unexpected: he begs her to take him in even though it is her duty (if not her time) to do so. He has no wish to return to Goneril and tries to use sweet words to reassure Regan that he will not turn on her (2.4.171-82). These words are the kindest that he has spoken to anyone, though, at the same time, he does remind her of her debt to him. He is now falsely flattering her in the same manner that she and Regan did to him during the contest.

When Goneril arrives and Lear realizes that they are allied against him, he says the only thing that he can think of to remind them of their filial obligation:

KING LEAR

I gave you all –
REGAN

And in good time you gave it. (2.4.252)

Clearly the sisters are not happy that they had to wait so long to come into their inheritance:

With wonderful insight, King Lear sees the problem of fathers and daughters from both sides. Lear is overwhelmed with feelings of ingratitude, at first toward Cordelia and then, in deadly earnest, toward Goneril and Regan [. . .]. Lear has an undoubted point: Goneril and Regan are indeed ungrateful. Yet they have a point as well. Lear is autocratic and ceaselessly selfish. (Bevington 196)

He reminds her that part of the conditions of that inheritance are his men, but obviously that does not matter because the sisters are the ones in power now:

Lear cannot let go. His attempt to relinquish temporal responsibility is not combined with a realistic appraisal of the necessary loss of privilege. Goneril and Regan torture him by quite specifically understanding his vulnerability and finding every way to strip him of power and remind him of his helpless dependency upon them. (Simon 107)

Finally Lear realizes how truly precarious his situation actually is. Whether or not Lear is truly as helpless as he believes himself to be in this situation is open to debate, but the important thing here is that he buys into that belief. “More often than not, I suspect, an adult’s perception of dependence is erroneous. People are too easily manipulated into believing they have no options, and thus they collude in their own self-deception” (Freyd,
Betrayal Trauma 194-95). He experiences the full force of their betrayal and rails against them:

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall – I will do such things, –
What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad! (2.4.274-88)

“In Lear’s rage at his other two daughters, we encounter other forms of degradation of parent-child closeness. We see the transforming power of narcissistic rage: the child is now an internal prosecutor or poisoner” (Simon 108). Whether in answer or to parallel
Lear’s wild emotions, a storm begins to bear down on all of them. Lear, spurred on by his increasing madness, runs off into the countryside despite the obvious danger.

Maybe he hopes that his daughters will pursue him, but Goneril and Regan seem only mildly interested in what he is doing. They are tired of playing games with him, though they still claim to be willing to care for him. It is difficult to believe that they harbor any tender feelings for him when the words are followed by their locking Lear out in the storm:

In the two older daughters, resistance to Lear’s demand for their total love, in the situation of sibling rivalry...has atrophied their tenderness; they have become sexually avid and demonically vengeful, eager to destroy the impossible old man who has destroyed their full humanity. The psychiatrist Harold Searles has pointed out that people are often driven crazy by other members of the family through a process that amounts to seeking to get rid of them, to murder. Lear’s eldest daughters drive him mad by depriving him of the sense of himself without which he cannot function [. . .]. (Barber and Wheeler 291)\(^{41}\)

They refuse to send anyone after him which could be seen as a choice not to risk anyone who goes out after Lear, but it is more likely that they are simply using the elements as a form of punishment for their father’s behavior.

\(^{41}\) See Searles – “The Effort to Drive the Other Person Crazy.”
Little do they realize that Lear subconsciously desires whatever abuse the weather metes out to him. The storm could be seen as a representation of a coping mechanism for Lear:

The wisdom of the organism is that there are many forms of coping and warding off the pain of reliving traumatic life experiences. Traditionally, these intrapsychic and behavioral activities have been studied as coping adaptations to stress or as ego defense processes associated with threat, anxiety, and somatic states of tension, agitation, and intolerable affects (Wilson et al., 2001). (Wilson 23)

His mind has cracked under the weight of his mistreatment. Lear is drenched with so much grief and agony that he wishes the heavens to truly drown him (3.2.14-20):

Clearly Lear’s madness contains a megalomaniac contest with the forces of nature, a delusion about his ability to control and command everything. For many viewers and readers, his behavior before his florid madness similarly involves an assumption, characterological rather than psychotic, that he can forestall some of life’s inevitabilities. These include not only the consequences of growing old and having to relinquish power, but the belief that one can control separations, divisions, and differentiations that are entailed in parent-child and sibling relationships and in political matters. (Simon 106)

No doubt such suicidal thoughts and actions would lead to his death if not for Kent’s arrival. He is able to pierce through Lear’s madness just enough to bring out his courteous side. He may not take care of himself, but he feels the need to seek shelter for
the sake of both Kent and the Fool. After all, a king is supposed to care for his people and he is definitely “every inch a king” (4.6.107) even when he does not consciously realize it.

Once safely inside, Lear continues to exhibit trauma symptoms:

The body’s delicate: the tempest in my mind

Doth from my senses take all feeling else

Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!

Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand

For lifting food to’t? But I will punish home:

No, I will weep no more. In such a night

To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure.

In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril!

Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all, –

O, that way madness lies; let me shun that;

No more of that. (3.4.12-22)

Lear refuses to acknowledge that he had any part in his current misfortune. In this case, despite Lear contributing to his own downfall, the ultimate responsibility does fall on Goneril and Regan. After all, like Agamemnon, they are adults and in full control of their actions. Unlike, him, however, they do not exhibit even an ounce of remorse over the distress that they have caused. They blame Lear as much as he blames them. But, for a time, Lear finds some peace in denial: "Denial is the term given a phase relevant to the
implications of the stressful event in which there is some combination of emotional
numbing, ideational avoidance, and behavioral constriction" (Horowitz, Stress Response
56).

Up until this point we might be able to believe that Goneril and Regan will
change their minds and regret their actions, horrible as they are. But then Gloucester
appears and reveals that their learned callousness (from Lear) has taken an even colder
turn: they plan to kill Lear. This plot is the second betrayal in the parent-child dynamic
(or third if you count Cordelia not telling Lear what he wants to hear in the opening
scene). Even Lear does not consider murder a viable option. His immediate choice of
punishment for transgressors to his will has been to exile them (the same thing that the
sisters have already done to him). To pursue patricide only shows that, instead of
brushing off Lear’s threat of retribution, they accept it as a serious threat. Such a fear
indicates that, all appearances to the contrary, Lear must actually have some kind of
power. Or it could simply be that they rightly fear he will go to Cordelia (who actually
has power now that she is married to the King of France), and they will have to face her
as some sort of an avenging angel (which does happen).

While Lear is swept offstage and out of the action, the main plot segues to the
secondary plot and the third major betrayal: Edmund setting up Gloucester so that he can
claim his father’s property. Having already exiled his faithful son, Edgar, and thus
leaving a clear path for Edmund to inherit, Gloucester’s support of King Lear gives
Edmund the “excuse” he needs to possess everything sooner. The sisters and Cornwall
“punish” Gloucester by physically blinding him, but this only serves to strip the blinders
from Gloucester’s mental eyes and forces him to realize the truth about his own betrayal.
Like Lear, he is exiled, possibly as a means to continue his torture and with an assumption that he will perish from his injuries and/or by the elements. Because Regan and Cornwall have no ounce of kindness or charity themselves, they do not expect that anyone will aid Gloucester. They are wrong, and he is eventually reunited with his beloved son, just as Lear is reunited with his beloved daughter. Both are forgiven, though Edgar does prolong Gloucester’s mental anguish longer than Cordelia has the heart to do to Lear. He does this by not revealing who he really is to Gloucester. Instead, he pretends to be Tom for a while longer. His motivation for this decision is unclear. Perhaps he is being petty and vengeful, though he does counter these labels by gently taking care of his father. Or it could simply be as a means of protecting himself from further hurt until he is sure of his father’s sincerity. Just because Gloucester has been betrayed by his other son and blinded by Cornwall and Regan does not mean that he could not begin railing against Edgar the minute he reveals himself. This hints at how Lear has treated his daughters, and, even though we have seen no evidence that Gloucester is like this, it is possible that he could emulate Lear in this behavior too.\(^{42}\)

Once both fathers realize that they have been reunited with their “lost” children, there is a joyful reunion. However, both are short lived. We do not get to see the moment when Edgar confesses who he is, but we hear it from him later in the play when he confronts Edmund (5.3.193-203). Gloucester’s trauma was physically severe, and his joy at finding Edgar was so great that his body was unable to handle the combination:

\(^{42}\) See Van Doren 205.
Like Lear, Gloucester is tormented, and his life is sought, by the child whom he favours; he is tended and healed by the child whom he has wronged. His sufferings, like Lear’s, are partly traceable to his own extreme folly and injustice, and, it may be added, to a selfish pursuit of his own pleasure. His sufferings, again, like Lear’s, purify and enlighten him: he dies a better and wiser man than he showed himself at first. (Bradley 271)

Gloucester realized far more quickly than Lear that he bore some responsibility for what happened to him. This revelation made it possible for mutual forgiveness to be asked and received before he died. So, like Gertrude and Hamlet, Gloucester and Edgar are able to restore their familial equilibrium before the end of the play. In both cases, such relief goes a long way in helping Hamlet and Edgar focus on their goals and achieve vengeance.

Lear’s mental trials were more severe, but his physical afflictions were far less, than Gloucester’s, so when he finally has his own epiphany and realizes that he is with Cordelia, Lear is able to embrace the reunion. Here is where the two narratives truly deviate because we get to witness this reconciliation:

KING LEAR

Be your tears wet? yes, ‘faith. I pray, weep not:
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.

CORDELIA

No cause, no cause.

........................................

KING LEAR

You must bear with me:

Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish. (4.7.73-7/88-90)

It is an incredibly powerful exchange. Cordelia has found her voice and the words that she needs to say to Lear and that he needs to hear:

Cordelia, who tried most honestly to make clear to her father her need for a new life of her own in marriage, has no hesitation in knowing what she must do when Lear is abandoned by her sisters. She must return to England and devote her life, if necessary, to caring for him. This is not what she wanted to do. It means leaving her husband; we never see them together after the first scene. It means invading England with a French army supplied by her husband, the French king, and thus engaging in a treasonous act against her native country. Most of all, it means sealing herself off from the rest of the world in the suffocating bond of a family relationship from which she hoped to escape through marriage. Yet she sees herself as having no choice. She tends to her father uncomplainingly, tenderly, lovingly. She offers the one thing that can restore his sanity, because his insanity is so much a product of his feeling that he has
wronged Cordelia unforgivably. She can cure that affliction by her silent forgiveness, or, rather, by her letting him know that forgiveness is not even necessary. (Bevington 197)

Plus, we are able to see a whole different side of Lear. Whether this new temperament is a product of his trauma or something that was there all the time is hard to tell. It is certainly a side of him that he kept hidden behind his pride and bravado. Their reunion and reconciliation last quite a bit longer than Gloucester and Edgar’s, but end in an even more spectacularly tragic style.

Cordelia and Lear are captured when her army is defeated by her sisters. Lear does not seem distressed over losing. Instead, he puts a positive spin on the situation:

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh (5.3.9-12)

“Lear’s childish expectations lead to the dramatic and tragic reversals of the play, in which children become mothers and fathers to their parents” (Simon 107). But “Cordelia does not manifest the same happiness as does her father when they are captured and sent to prison together. To Lear, being with her is all that matters now. He is ecstatic. She says only that she is concerned for his welfare” (Bevington 197). Still, she quietly accepts their imprisonment and they are led away not knowing that there is a plot to kill her.
Edmund gave the commission to do so to the guard captain and confesses this to Edgar with his last words. Edgar and Albany are too late to save Cordelia, and Lear appears onstage with her in his arms. It is one of the most tragic scenes ever written. Here is the kind of pity and fear that Aristotle called for in a play: “Lear’s five-times repeated ‘Never’, in which the simplest and most unanswerable cry of anguish rises note by note till the heart breaks, is romantic in its naturalism [. . .]” (Bradley 270). Just as Lear has realized what truly matters most in the world and has learned to be a humble man content with what he has, he loses it all in one final act of betrayal. Goneril and Regan could not have destroyed him more completely even if they had put an actual knife through his heart themselves. There is certainly pity for Lear and, especially, Cordelia, at this moment even if previously there were feelings of antipathy for them.\footnote{43} Lear’s grief is too palpable to be denied.

Lear dies before learning that his other daughters are dead as well. It is doubtful that it would have been much consolation for him as he seems to have moved past the need for retribution for their betrayals. He killed Cordelia’s obvious murderer and that seems to have depleted him of any vengeful energy that he might have had. Kent has it right when he says, “Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! he hates him much / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (5.3.219-21). While it is sad that Lear dies, it is probably the most merciful thing that Shakespeare could have done for him. Had he survived, it is doubtful that his mind could have withstood this final blow. Earlier in the play Shakespeare showed that it is possible to bounce back from betrayal and trauma, but, at the end, he shows that everyone has their limits.

\footnote{43} See Bradley 293.
Couples

The entire plot of *Ariane* is centered upon overlapping romantic relationships. The play clearly shows how complicated love (or any similarly strong emotion) can make a relationship. Ariane and Thésée are the core couple, but each has a secondary relationship: Oenarus pines for Ariane while Thésée woos Phèdre. Thésée is the heir to the Athenian throne, Ariane and Phèdre are Cretan princesses, and Oenarus is the king of Naxos. So, one classical view of tragedy is observed because all of the main characters are of royal blood. However, what truly makes this play a tragedy is that the title character, Ariane, is utterly devastated by betrayal.

Oenarus’s declaration of love is a perfect summation of how love works and is echoed throughout the play:

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Non, ce n'est ni par choix, ni par raison d'aimer,
Qu'en voyant ce qui plaît, on se laisse enflammer.
D'un aveugle penchant le charme imperceptible
Frappe, saisit, entraîne, et rend un cœur sensible,
Et par une secrète et nécessaire loi
On se livre à l'Amour sans qu'on sache pourquoi.
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Je l'éprouve au supplice où le Ciel me condamne.

Tout me parle pour Phèdre, et tout contre Ariane;

Et quoi que sur le choix ma raison ait de jour,

L'une a ma seule estime, et l'autre mon amour. (1.1.87-96)

[Nay, it is not by choice nor any logic

That one on seeing her who doth attract him

Loves; the intangible charm of a blind preference

 Strikes, seizes, conquers, and makes the heart responsive;

And by a secret and resistless law

One without knowing why to love surrenders.

I prove it by the tortures to which heaven

Dooms me. Everything speaks to me in favor

Of Phaedra, everything 'gainst Ariadne,

Yet though my mind hath ample light, the first

Has only my esteem, the last my love. (T. Corneille, Lockert 403)]

Ariane respects Oenarus, but is passionately in love with Thésée, who in turn has come to respect her, but love another. Of course, at this point, only Thésée and Phèdre know about this relationship, so Oenarus believes that he loves in vain because Ariane will not betray Thésée for him. “Even more important [. . . than Oenarus’s personal beliefs] is knowledge of the socially-shared rules and expectations that are most salient to any
particular relational context” (Fitness 77). It would not be socially acceptable for Oenarus to force his suit upon someone who is promised to another.

Everyone who sees Ariane and Thésée together cannot help but remark on how strong her feelings are for him. They seem to be the kind of emotions that everyone wishes they could receive. For example, upon his arrival in Naxos, Pirithous (Thésée’s best friend) uses the words “fort” (strong), “pur” (pure), and “tendre” (tender) as the main descriptors (1.3.165). The words are an interesting combination, and ones that are repeated whenever someone talks about Ariane in general. “A fantasy pervades our stories, ideas, and images about intimate connections. The fantasy is that intimacy can be perfect, can be made shadow-free, that the shadow side of Eros can be suppressed” (Wilkinson 77). Pirithous goes on to say that Ariane would do whatever Thésée desires of her because “Son coeur de cette gloire [est] uniquement charmé” (1.3.167) [To please you is the only glory that charms her heart]. Basically, Ariane’s heart has fallen firmly under Thésée’s spell. Oscar Mandel chose to translate the whole passage (1.3.165-67) as, “I saw a devotion past believing – the purest tenderness – to sacrifice her life for you would be a trifle in her estimation” (T. Corneille 6-7). Ariane sees their love as pure and unimpeachable.

Thésée does recognize that he owes Ariane, but has tried, in vain, to love her:

Qui n'eût fait comme moi ?

Pour me suivre, Ariane abandonnait son Père,

Je lui devais la vie, elle avait de quoi plaire.

Mon coeur sans passion me laissait présumer
Qu'il prendrait à mon choix l'habitude d'aimer.

Par là, ce qu'il donnait à la reconnaissance

De l'amour auprès d'elle eut l'entièr e apparence.

Pour payer ce qu'au sien je voyais être dû

Mille devoirs... Hélas ! C'est ce qui m'a perdu.

Je les rendais d'un air à me tromper moi-même

À croire que déjà ma flamme était extrême,

Lorsqu'un trouble secret me fit apercevoir

Que souvent pour aimer c'est peu que le vouloir.  (1.3.204-16)

[Who would not have done like me?]

To follow me, Ariadne left her father.

I owed my life to her; she lacked not charms.

My heart, though loveless, let me think it would,

If so I chose, acquire the wont of loving.

In that way, what it gave through gratitude

Had in her eyes entirely the appearance

Of love. To pay her what I saw was due her,

Countless attentions . . . Alas, that undid me!

I paid them with an air that could deceive

Myself to think my love was great already,
When inward turmoil forced me to perceive
That oft 'tis vainly one desires to love. (T. Corneille, Lockert 406)]

Ariane cannot ever return home because of her own betrayal of her father. She has effectively cut off all ties to her former life and therefore has nothing but what her union with Thésée can give her, but marriage is all she wants anyway. Thésée recognizes this but he also realizes that going through with their original plans would mean being untrue to himself. Thésée is not completely indifferent to Ariane, but, should they marry, he could become so, since he does not feel the same passion as she does for him.

Thésée decides that the best course of action is to get Ariane to shift her romantic focus to Oenarus (whom he knows is in love with her). He believes that if Ariane knows he loves another, she will marry the king to spite him. Thésée’s plan is also a misguided attempt to set up some kind of an alternate support system for Ariane since she will be losing her two closest allies once she becomes aware of the betrayal.

Pirithous urges Ariane to accept Oenarus, but without much explanation. At first he lets her believe that it is political because “ce n'est que des âmes communes / Que l'Amour s'autorise à régler les fortunes” (2.5.609-10) [“it is only common souls / Whose fortunes love has any warrant to rule” (T. Corneille, Lockert 416)]. Ariane becomes suspicious, but Pirithous refuses to tell her the truth. Instead he tells her, “Je me tais, c'est à vous à voir ce qu'il faut croire” (2.5.646) [“I say naught. Thou shalt judge what thou must think” (T. Corneille, Lockert 417)]. She begins to catch on that he is suggesting that Thésée has found someone else:
ARIANE

Non, non, Pirithoüs, on vous trompe sans doute.

Il m’aime ; et s’il m’en faut séparer quelque jour,

Je pleurerai sa mort, et non pas son amour.

PIRITHOUS

Souvent ce qui nous plaît par une erreur fatale. . . (2.5.650-53)

[ARIADNE. No, no, Pirithoüs! thou'rt deluded, surely.

He loves me, and if someday we are parted,

'Twill be his death I mourn, not his lost love.

PIRITHOUS. Often what pleases us, by a fatal error. . . (T. Corneille, Lockert 417)]

Oscar Mandel’s translation completes Pirithous’s thought: “So you believe, because you wish to believe it. (T. Corneille, Mandel 8). Nothing that anyone can say will convince Ariane that Thésée has had a change of heart. Her denial is understandable since Thésée has, until this point, managed to portray some semblance of being a devoted lover. Research has shown that this denial is far more frequent among women than men:

[. . .] in a study in which participants were asked to rate their perceptions of male and female reactions to a partner’s infidelity, compared to men, women were perceived as more likely to react with disappointment and self-doubt to a partner’s infidelity, and women were also perceived to be more willing to protect the relationship (Boekhout et al, 1999).
Additionally, women were seen as more likely to deny their partner’s involvement and yet more willing to confront their partner and find out the reason for the infidelity. (Boekhout, Hendrick, and Hendrick 367)

In protecting the relationship, Ariane also protects herself since she has given up so much for him. Some part of her knows that Thésée has strayed, and she may have known that for some time, but she is determined to stave off a conscious acknowledgment.

Jennifer Freyd believes “that knowledge is multi-stranded, and that we can at the same time not know and know about a betrayal. Indeed, it is the human condition simultaneously to know and not to know about a given betrayal” (Betrayal Trauma 4). In situations like Ariane’s, this hidden knowledge is a necessary defense mechanism because “Humans are social beings, fundamentally dependent on relationships, alliances, and trust. Betrayal violates the basic ethic of human relationships, and though we are skilled at recognizing betrayal when it occurs, this ability may be stifled for the greater goal of survival” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 164). Ariane had betrayed her father in order to help the man she loves. Like Médée, this has caused her to be exiled from her home. She can never go back. This means that she is just as reliant upon Thésée for her survival as Médée was with Jason. Thésée’s betrayal threatens that survival, but Ariane’s blindness protects her, if only psychologically. Once Ariane becomes conscious of the truth, she will then have to deal with the reality that her life could truly be in danger because she will be losing that protection.

Even though Pirithous will not directly confirm that she does, indeed, have a rival for Thésée’s affections, Ariane cannot remain in the dark for long. As soon as Pirithous leaves and Nérine enters, Ariane acknowledges that “je suis trahie.” (2.6.663) Lockert
and Mandel differ in their word choice for this declaration: the former translates it as, “I have been forsaken,” (418) while the later uses a simple, “I’m betrayed!” (18) Either translation does well to convey the desolation that is settling into Ariane’s mind: “The person who has been betrayed is devastated, inexpressibly weakened before a truth only intuited, which is incomprehensible to her because it is buried at the most archaic and primitive psychic levels of unconsciousness” (Carotenuto 84). However, Nérine will not let her prevaricate on this point. She has suspected it and will not let Ariane delude herself into thinking that Pirithous could be wrong about the situation.

Ariane’s reaction is quite normal for someone who finds out that her ideal relationship has been a lie:

There are many ways in which a woman may finally realize that such a fantasy contract will never pay off [. . .]. Any of these events will give rise to a sense of betrayal. Believing, however incorrectly, that editing and confining herself will lead to intimate connections that will make her feel special, a woman in this situation feels cheated when the connection is broken. And this sense of betrayal is, of course, more intense when real cheating (that is, infidelity) voids the contract. (Wilkinson 114-15)

Still, a part of Ariane hopes that it is all a misinterpretation and refuses to fully embrace the truth until she has heard it from Thésée himself.

Pirithous believes that Ariane should not torment herself with speaking to Thésée, but instead accept that he has betrayed her and find new love with Oenarus. He does not understand that “For the partner betrayed, searching for that explanation is part of the process of working out mourning, in which that question does not find meaning in a
response – always and inevitably unsatisfactory – but in the time taken to organize a possible defense” (Carotenuto 84). But Ariane has begun to internalize the blame instead of settling it upon the true guilty party, Thésée. “Clearly, the discovery that a spouse or romantic partner has been unfaithful strikes a devastating blow to an individual's sense of self-worth and needs for commitment and emotional security (Charney & Parnass, 1995; Weiss, 1975)” (Fitness 78-79). She thinks that she has been foolish because she should have questioned things more when Thésée delayed the wedding:

Et ne devais-je pas, quoi qu'il me fît entendre,
Pénétrer les raisons qui vous faisaient attendre,
Et juger qu'en un coeur épris d'un feu constant,
L'Amour à l'Amitié ne déferre pas tant ?
Ah, quand il est ardent, qu'ai raison il s'abuse !
Il croit ce qu'il souhaite, et prend tout pour excuse. (3.3.873-78)

[And should I not, whate'er it was he told me,
Have understood, have seen the reason which
Made him await thee, and have realized
That in a heart kindled with abiding fires
Love does not thus delay for friendship's sake?
Ah, when one loves, how easily one deceives
Oneself! Whate'er one wishes, one believes,
And accepts anything for an excuse. (T. Corneille, Lockert 423)]

She does not realize that “Unawareness, not knowing, forgetting, dissociating — being less than fully connected internally — may be adaptive if the external situation is such that awareness, knowing, remembering, and integrating would be life-threatening” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 195). Her awareness means that she should no longer be making excuses for him, but she is.

When Ariane faces Thésée at last, she claims that she must be the cause of why he has turned to another:

Et si ce qu'on m'a dit a quelque vérité,

Vous cessez de m'aimer, je l'aurai mérité.

Le changement est grand, mais il est légitime,

Je le crois. Seulement apprenez-moi mon crime ;

Et d'où vient qu'exposée à de si rudes coups,

Ariane n'est plus ce qu'elle fut pour vous. (3.4.919-24)

[Is to be done; and if what I am told

Be at all true, that thou hast ceased to love me,

'Tis my desert. The charge [sic] is great but just.

This I believe. But tell me my offense

And why, when Ariadne is exposed

To Fate's hard blows, she is no longer what

She was to thee. (T. Corneille, Lockert 424-25)]
Surely she has done something wrong or he would not be betraying her and himself through these actions. Wrongly accepting the blame for Thésée’s infidelity is a normal reaction:

The breaking of the contract leads to feelings of intense worthlessness, fears of being the wrong kind of person, for if they were the right kind of woman all would be well in the relationship. Still others see their feelings of betrayal and emptiness as the exclusive fault of the object of their devotion, the one who has failed to repay their devotion. As such, these excruciating feelings are channeled into a self-righteous reversal. It is the betrayer who is worthless, who is the wrong kind of person. (Wilkinson 115)

But Ariane does not want to see Thésée as worthless because, despite her pain, she still loves him and still wants to see him as a hero. If he has betrayed her, his actions are not honorable and thus he is no true hero.

Ariane gives Thésée the perfect opportunity to shift the blame, but he refuses because a part of him is honorable, though that seems contradictory to his current behavior. Thésée cannot blame someone who does not deserve it. “Similarly, a truly contrite offender must take full responsibility for the offense; as Jacoby (1983) explained, there is a big difference between a friend or lover who simply says, ‘I'm sorry you're hurt,’ and one who says, ‘What I did was wrong; you have every right to be hurt and I'm sorry’ (see also Cody et al., 1992)” (Fitness 84). In this moment we get a glimpse of the man that Ariane fell in love with. Here Thésée shows that he does have some strength of character: “Integrity involves a balance of wants and shoulds, between impulses and self-
regulations, and between values of different relationships” (Horowitz, *Cognitive Psychodynamics* 144). It is possible that Thésée truly does feel guilty for his betrayal, but, of course, by making Ariane feel better, he is also searching for a way to absolve himself of responsibility.

Still, Thésée does admit directly to Ariane that he owes her a great deal and claims to care for her still:

Ah, pourquoi le penser? Elle est toujours la même,

Même zèle toujours suit mon respect extrême,

Et le temps dans mon coeur n'affaiblira jamais

Le pressant souvenir de ses rares bienfaits ;

M'en acquitter vers elle est ma plus forte envie.

Oui, Madame, ordonnez de mon Sang, de ma vie.

Si la fin vous en plaît, le sort me sera doux

Par qui j'obtiendrai l'heure de la perdre pour vous. (3.4.925-32)

[Ah, wherefore think in this wise!

She ever is the same; and I feel ever

The same zeal which my high esteem bred for her,

And time will ne'er make fainter in my heart

The vivid memory of her great boons.

My strongest wish is to repay her for them.

Yes, madam; ask of me my blood, my life;
If that would please thee, I would love the chance

To have the joy of losing it for thee. (T. Corneille, Lockert 425)]

But Ariane does not want his death or his respect, she wants his love:

Si quand je vous connus la fin eût pu m'en plaire,

Le Destin la vouloir, je l'aurais laissé faire.

Par moi, par mon amour, le Labyrinthe ouvert

Vous fit fuir le trépas à vos regards offert ;

Et quand à votre foi cet amour s'abandonne,

Des serments de respect sont le prix qu'on lui donne !

Par ce soin de vos jours qui m'a fait tout quitter,

N'aspirais-je à rien de plus qu'à me voir respecter ?

Un service pareil veut un autre salaire.

C'est le coeur, le coeur seul, qui peut y satisfaire.

Il a seul pour mes voeux ce qui peut les borner,

C'est lui seul [. . .]. (3.4.933-44)

[If, when I knew thee first, that end had pleased me,

And Fate thus willed, I would have let Fate act.

By me, by my love, was the Labyrinth opened,

And so didst thou escape the death that faced thee—

And when my love gives me into thy keeping,
Vows of esteem are the reward it has!

When I to save thy life gave up all else,

Did I aspire to naught but thy esteem?

Services like mine want quite different payment;

The heart, naught but the heart, can recompense them.

'Tis that alone [. . .]. (T. Corneille, Lockert 425)

This repetition also highlights the amount of stress that she is under because “[. . .] major stress events tend to be followed by involuntary repetition in thought, emotion, and behavior. Such responses tend to occur in phases and to alternate with periods of relatively successful warding off of repetitions as manifested by ideational denial and emotional numbness” (Horowitz, *Stress Response* 21). Ariane’s mind is fixated upon one idea: proving her worth and Thésée’s obligation to her. Maybe if she says it enough times, the outcome will eventually be different. But, as with any traumatic event that has taken place, it cannot be undone. “Indeed, although confessing infidelity can provide great relief to the offender, it shifts a considerable burden of pain to the one who has been betrayed and frequently does not result in forgiveness (Lawson, 1988)” (Fitness 81).

Even though she ends up sending Thésée away, she wants him to stay. Ariane still desires his presence, “Qu'il sút en s'emportant, ce que l'Amour souhaite, / Et qu'à mon désespoir souffrant un libre cours, / Il s'entendit chasser, et demeurât toujours” (3.5.1098-1100) [“How could he know, rushing hence, what love wanted? / Why did he not let my despair be vented, / Hear himself ordered hence, and still remain?” (T. Corneille, Lockert 429)]. Oscar Mandel’s translation of this passage borders on the
masochistic: “To allow me to kiss the hand that strikes me. Could he not tell my secret wish?” (28). Ariane has been caught somewhere between anger and chronic grief. At first the grief wins, “Chronic grief: This is expressed in full from the outset and goes on for an abnormal length of time. It tends to follow the ending of relationships characterised by dependence or clinging, and is associated with intense feelings of helplessness” (Parkes 13). The grief is suppressed for a while when Ariane’s anger comes through with a vengeance:

Mais si d'un autre amour il se laisse éblouir,

Peut-être il n'aura pas la douceur d'en jouir,

Il verra ce que c'est que de me percer l'âme.

Allons, Nérine, allons, je suis Amante et Femme ;

Il veut ma mort, j'y cours : mais avant que mourir,

Je ne sais qui des deux aura plus à souffrir. (3.5.1119-24)

[But if he lets himself be fascinated

By a new love, perhaps he will not taste

The sweetness of it. He will learn what 'tis

To stab me to the heart. Come, come, Nerina!

I am a woman, and in love. He wished

My death; I hasten to it; but ere I die

I know not which will suffer most, he or I! (T. Corneille, Lockert 429-30)]
Her emotional trauma has made her desperate and grasping at the need for some kind of action. “The broken contract, the uncompensated sacrifice of self, gives the woman victim status in her eyes and in the eyes of some others. Victim status then confers the right to vindication. Vindication is sought in the arena where the sacrifice was made – relationships” (Wilkinson 116). Her relationship is in a shambles, and her lover is about to start a new one. It seems only fair that he should feel some pain for what he has done to her.

On the one hand, she wants to die as a means of punishing Thésée, but that does not seem to be enough nor is it assured of success since he has this other woman to console him. So, she will seek to cause him grief where it will hurt the most: the new relationship. There is no doubt that Ariane has coupled her despair with jealousy:

Moreover, betrayals that have involved sexual or emotional infidelity are likely to evoke the highly complex emotional syndrome known as jealousy, which includes fear of rejection, anger, and sadness (Sharpsteen, 1991). [. . .] However, researchers have also noted the often serious concomitants and consequences of chronic or intense jealousy, including hostility, resentment, alienation, withdrawal, even murder (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988; van Sommers, 1988). (Fitness 82)

If Ariane were a shallow character, her reaction would seem to be nothing more than petty revenge. But she deeply feels the love. That is more dangerous:

Strong love [. . .] is like undiluted wine in the bowl. We must always add enough water to prevent intoxication. Deep involvement leads to deep disappointment, anger, and frustration when the beloved one cannot or
will not fulfill one’s expectations, and from there it leads to the problems of conflict, jealousy, and the attendant desire for revenge. (Simon 95)

However, lashing out will not bring Ariane a cathartic release because “people erroneously believe revenge will make them feel better and help them gain closure, when in actuality punishers ruminate on their deed and feel worse than those who cannot avenge a wrong” (Jaffe). She is unknowingly inflicting even more trauma upon herself with this desire for revenge.

Ariane is able to exhibit moments of clarity, but they are forged from a hard resolve for vengeance. She promises Oenarus that she will marry him, but only once she has seen Thésée do so first. Her reasoning seems quite logical:

Que sans m'en vouloir croire,

Thésée à ses désirs abandonne sa gloire ;

Dès que d'un autre Objet je le verrai l'époux,

Si vous m'aimez encor, Seigneur, je suis à vous.

Mon coeur de votre hymen se fait un heur suprême, (4.2.1237-41)

[Though thou'dst not believe me,

Let Theseus sacrifice to his desires

His honor; when I see him wed another,

If thou still lovest me, sir, I shall be thine.

My heart will find its supreme good in marriage

With thee [. . .]. (T. Corneille, Lockert 433)]
Ariane will not be truly free so long as he is unmated. But it is merely a ruse so that she can discover the lover’s identity and unleash her vengeance. Once she knows who her rival is, she plans to kill her in front of Thésée so that he experiences the kind of loss and pain that she feels.

The feigned calmness is short-lived. Most likely this is because the revelation does not occur quickly enough for Ariane’s peace of mind. At the beginning of the last act, Nérine questions Ariane’s behavior:

À quoi sert ce transport, ce désespoir extrême ?

Vous avez dans un trouble à nul autre pareil

Prévenu ce matin le lever du Soleil.

Dans le Palais errante, interdite, abattue,

Vous avez laissé voir la douleur qui vous tue.

Ce ne sont que soupirs, que larmes, que sanglots. (5.1.1490-95)

[What serve such transports, such complete despair?

Thou hast, in thy soul's turmoil matched by none,

Outstripped today the rising of the sun.

Wandering, confused, dejected, through the palace,

Thou hast displayed the grief that killeth thee.

Thou givest forth naught but sighs and sobs and tears. (T. Corneille, Lockert 439)]
Nérine is rightly concerned about Ariane’s state of mind. She is worried that Ariane will do herself physical harm (i.e. fall ill) as well as hurt her reputation by displaying such wild behavior in public. “According to Morrison and Robinson (1997), the initial discovery and experience of betrayal goes far beyond the mere cognitive awareness that a violation has occurred; rather, the feeling of violation is registered at a deep, visceral level” (Fitness 81). Ariane cannot help her agitation and it must be expressed somehow because:

The psychological effects of trauma are expressed on all levels of organismic functioning: physical; psychological; social; spiritual; interpersonal; and systems of belief, ideology, values, and meaning.

(Wilson 15)

Ariane is certainly experiencing and displaying her reactions to betrayal on a myriad of levels.

It takes a few more scenes for Ariane to learn the whole truth and to discover that Thésée has run off with Phèdre in the middle of the night. She hears rumors that only increase her turmoil to such an extreme that when she finally accepts the truth, she all but shatters. Nérine seems less than sympathetic this time though: “Calmez cette douleur, où vous emporte-t-elle? / Madame, songez-vous que tous ces vains projets / Par l'éclat de vos cris s'entendent au Palais?” (5.5.1664-66) [Calm thy grief. Whither doth it sweep thee? Madam, / Wouldst thou that all these vain designs should be, / Through thy cries' violence, known in this palace? (T. Corneille, Lockert 444)]. This is not the response that Ariane should have received because “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the
restitution of a sense of a meaningful world” (Herman 70). Ariane does not care who knows about her grief. Indeed, all should know about it and why:

Qu'importe que partout mes plaintes soient ouïes !

On connaît, on a vu des Amantes trahies,

À d'autres quelquefois on a manqué de foi,

Mais, Nérine, jamais il n'en fut comme moi.

Par cette tendre ardeur dont j'ai chéri Thésée,

Avais-je mérité de m'en voir méprisée ?

De tout ce que j'ai fait considère le fruit.

Quand je suis pour lui seul, c'est moi seule qu'il fuit.

Pour lui seul je dédaigne une Couronne offerte ;

En séduisant ma Soeur, il conspire ma perte. (5.5.1667-76)

[What if my plainings are heard everywhere?

All know – have seen – women who loved betrayed;

With others sometimes men have broken faith;

But never was it as with me, Nerina.

When I loved Theseus so devotedly,

Did I deserve to see myself disdained?

Behold the fruit of all that I have done!

As only for his sake I fled, 'tis only
From me that he now flees. Only for him

Have I refused an offered crown. By winning

My sister's heart he hath contrived my ruin. (T. Corneille, Lockert 444)

Ariane is not only seeking aid from Nérine, but also from the community as a whole.

This is a healthy response:

The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action. Once it is publicly recognized that a person has been harmed, the community must take action to assign responsibility for the harm and to repair the injury. These two responses — recognition and restitution — are necessary to rebuild the survivor’s sense of order and justice. (Herman 70)

Nérine is the closest personal support that Ariane has left, but she wishes to keep Ariane from making her grief public. In doing so, Nérine represents a lack of solid support and thus Ariane’s recovery process is hindered.

Ariane’s grief becomes more pronounced as the act finishes. She is caught up in a deep despair and a helpless anger:

This type of anger is similar to internalized anger, but it is expressed with more weeping and agitation. The sheer helplessness of frustration and deprivation, coupled with the hopelessness of having to forfeit a beloved
relationship, leaves the bereaved feeling powerless and out of control.

This type is often seen in suicide cases. (Sanders 63)

In fact, Ariane tries to throw herself upon Pirithous’s sword, but is stopped. Ariane has lost the two people she loves most in the world. The fact that this loss occurs through acts of betrayal means that the pain is that much greater for her. In the end, she mercifully faints because that is the only escape that her mind and body can truly give her.

**Siblings**

Unlike the backbiting and separation that occurs between the three sisters in *King Lear*, it is clear that the two sisters in *Ariane* truly love one another. However, this is not enough to keep one from deceiving the other: Phèdre betrays her sister because she has fallen in love with Ariane’s betrothed, Thésée. Phèdre did not plot to do this, which Nérine confirms when she talks about how Phèdre has always been romantically detached: “Je ne m'étonne point de cette indifférence. / N'ayant jamais aimé, son coeur ne conçoit pas [. . .]” (2.1.434-35) [“Her [Phaedra’s] unconcern is not surprising to me. / Ne'er having loved, her heart does not conceive[. . .]” (T. Corneille, Lockert 412)]. Like Cordelia, Phèdre exhibits immediate stress and worry because of what she must do to her loved one, but, unlike Cordelia, there is no sense of relief to be gained (however momentary) from the betrayal. The truth does not absolve her because she feels guilty for choosing her own happiness over Ariane’s.

Phèdre is suffering from moral injury: “moral injury involves an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and
beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness” (Litz et al. 698). Phèdre believes that falling in love with Thésée is morally wrong so she has avoided committing to her emotions. As Litz et al. explains:

Moral injury requires an act of transgression that severely and abruptly contradicts an individual’s personal or shared expectation about the rules or the code of conduct, either during the event or at some point afterwards [. . .]. The event can be an act of wrongdoing, failing to prevent serious unethical behavior, or witnessing or learning about such an event. The individual also must be (or become) aware of the discrepancy between his or her morals and the experience (i.e., moral violation), causing dissonance and inner conflict. (700)

Phèdre is aware of the discrepancy, but she does not have the emotional maturity or life experience to handle the repercussions:

If individuals are unable to assimilate or accommodate (integrate) the event within existing self- and relational-schemas, they will experience guilt, shame, and anxiety about potential dire personal consequences (e.g., ostracization). Poor integration leads to lingering psychological distress, due to frequent intrusions, and avoidance behaviors tend to thwart successful accommodation. (Litz et al. 698)

Phèdre does try to emotionally separate herself from her sister’s betrothed. However, this resistance has done little to stop Thésée from pursuing her.

At the beginning of the play, Phèdre is still resisting Thésée:
J'aurais de ces combats affranchi votre coeur,

Si j'eusse eu pour Rivale une autre qu'une Soeur ;

Mais trahir l'amitié dont on la voit sans cesse [. . .]

Non, Thésée, elle m'aime avec trop de tendresse.

D'un supplice si rude il faut la garantir,

Sans doute elle en mourrait, je n'y puis consentir.

Rendez-lui votre amour, cet amour qui sans elle

Aurait peut-être dû me demeurer fidèle ;

Cet amour qui toujours trop propre à me charmer [. . .]. (1.4.323-31)

[I would have set thy heart free from such strife

Had anyone but a sister been my rival;

But to betray the affection always shown [. . .]

No, Theseus, no; too tenderly she loves me.

She must be saved from such great agony.

'Twould surely mean her death; consent to this

I cannot. Give her back thy love, that love

Which but for her perchance ought to have been

Faithful to me; that love (to which I always

Too easily responded) dares not [. . .]. (T. Corneille, Lockert 409)
She knows her sister quite well and does not exaggerate what the news could do to Ariane. This idea is supported later in the play when Ariane tells Phèdre, “Je vous connais, ma Soeur. / Aussi c’est seulement en vous ouvrant mon âme, / Que dans son désespoir je soulage ma flamme” (4.3.1280-82) [“I know thee, my sister; / And 'tis alone by laying bare my soul / To thee that I find solace in my despair” (T. Corneille, Lockert 434)]. Oscar Mandel’s translation is very melodramatic but plausible: “you are the one consolation I have left; without you I would sink into the earth” (32). Having Ariane confirm Phèdre’s belief in their relationship dynamic does make Phèdre seem more monstrous for her betrayal but it also adds more stress and guilt upon her. From Phèdre’s point of view, she is being torn apart inside between two love choices: one familial and one romantic.

By choosing her lover over her sister, Phèdre is bereft of her one perpetual support:

Social support before and after the morally injurious event is likely to influence the related psychosocial impact. However, compared to those suffering from PTSD, those who suffer from moral injury may be more reluctant to utilize social supports, and it is possible that they may be actually shunned in light of the moral violation. Charuvastra and Cloitre underscored how exposure to human-generated traumatic events (typically interpersonal trauma) result in more toxic impact and distress than exposure to harm alone because human-generated events represent a breakdown of social norms in addition to diminished expectations of safety. Because morally injurious events are almost always human-
generated, the breakdown of the social contract is as germane. (Litz et al. 699)

Phèdre does have Thésée to lean on and support her after the betrayal becomes known, but as he is the root cause of her moral injury, she will never be completely free of the guilt. Despite this, Phèdre consciously chooses to accept Thésée’s love.

One of the biggest reasons that Phèdre gives in to her own desires is because the king of Naxos, Oenarus, is also in love with Ariane, but she will not accept his suit. Most likely, in the beginning, Phèdre listened out of a sense of duty to their host. It is possible that, as time went by and she realized that she was falling in love with Thésée, she concluded that she might be able to use Oenarus’ passion for her own gain. She certainly does not seem opposed to the idea. Phèdre may have even convinced herself that the plan is in her sister’s best interest because “[…] betrayers may believe their intentions were good. They may argue they were doing their victims a favor, or at least, that their betrayals were unintended, excusable, and due to temporary, extenuating, or unstable causes (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Hansson et al., 1990; Jones & Burdette, 1997; Leary et al., 1998)” (Fitness 82-83). After all, Ariane is in political danger from aiding Thésée, and he is currently not in a position to truly protect her (or so he claims).

Phèdre also relents to make Thésée happy, even though she believes that he should have remained faithful to Ariane:

Les Dieux me sont témoins que de son injustice

Je souffre malgré moi qu’il me rende complice.

Ce qu’il doit à ma Soeur meritait que sa foi
Se fît de l'aimer seule une sévère loi ;

Et quand des longs ennuis où ce refus l'expose,

Par ma facilité je me trouve la cause,

Il n'est peine, supplice, où pour l'en garantir

La pitié de ses maux ne me fit consentir.

L'amour que j'ai pour lui me noircit peu vers elle.

Je l'ai pris sans songer à le rendre infidèle ;

Ou plutôt j'ai senti tout mon coeur s'enflammer,

Avant que de savoir si je voulais aimer.

Mais si ce feu trop prompt n'eut rien de volontaire,

Il dépendait de moi de parler, ou me taire.

J'ai parlé, c'est mon crime [...] (3.1.769-83)

[The gods can bear me witness that 'tis 'gainst

My will I let him make me an accomplice

In his wrongdoing. What he owes my sister

Required that he in honor should have felt

Inexorably bound to love her only;

And when I find myself, through being pliant,

The cause of the long woe which being discarded

Will bring on her, there is no pain, no torture
To which my pity for her misery

Would not make me consent, to save her from it.

The love I have for him was not my guilt;

I felt it without thought of making him

Faithless, or rather I felt all my heart

Aflame ere knowing if I wished to love.

But though this tooquick

love came by no choice

Of mine, it rested with me whether I should

Speak or be silent. I spoke; that was my crime. (T. Corneille, Lockert 420-21)

It is true that falling in love with him did not betray Ariane. Emotions can be hard to control. What makes her a traitor in this case is the fact that she speaks of it to him and then agrees to act upon it. Had she stoically suffered in silence then she would “only” have betrayed herself.

Phèdre is so emotionally confused by her own actions that she is willing to grasp any hope of happiness that she may be able to find in the future. She knows that Oenarus will protect Ariane so she wants to believe that her sister will be able to find love and happiness again. However, Phèdre believes that being with Thésée is the only way that she can fulfill this desire for herself, despite the enormous amount of pain it also causes her to do so:

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Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor’s inner life but also in her close relationships. It results in the formation of intense, unstable relationships that fluctuate between extremes. (Herman 56)

Phèdre could choose to do the “right thing,” but instead opts to run away and become the dreaded betrayer.

The following explanation of betrayal trauma reactions holds true for Phèdre because she is traumatized (albeit by her own actions) and will continue to be so:

Further, even if individuals are no longer in the dependent relationships that involved the betrayal, withdrawal symptoms may have been learned as a coping response and continued later in life. Fear, on the other hand, is proposed to relate more directly to anxiety and arousal symptoms. Because many traumatic events involve degrees of both betrayal and fear, betrayal and fear likely contribute to both withdrawal and arousal symptoms. (DePrince 26-27)
Phèdre flees from her sister but is unable to escape her own guilt. She fears the repercussions of what will happen when Ariane learns the truth.

It comes as no surprise, then, that when she finds out that her sister has betrayed her, Ariane goes mad with grief:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (Herman 51)

Ariane is kept from various violent courses of action, but the play ends with her mentally unconscious broken heap. This reaction is the best coping mechanism that she has. “Unawareness, not knowing, forgetting, dissociating — being less than fully connected internally – may be adaptive if the external situation is such that awareness, knowing, remembering, and integrating would be life-threatening” (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 195). Phèdre’s absence could help Ariane heal but her flight does little to help herself. In the end, the betrayal traumatizes both sisters because the pain will remain with Ariane and the guilt will follow Phèdre.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I argued that familial betrayal is a central element in sixteenth century British tragedy and seventeenth century French tragedy through an analysis of six specific plays that covered the wide array of human relationships. Just as in real life, the betrayals performed by the characters are both conscious and unconscious. They also run the gamut from what we might consider minor transgressions to unforgivable acts. Certain actions (like Claudius betraying his family through regicide) are very clearly betrayals, while others are subtler (like Richard having an emotionally distant mother while growing up). Indeed, it is quite understandable that certain audiences would see such actions as normal because “When psychological trauma involves betrayal, the victim may be less aware or less able to recall the traumatic experience because to do so will likely lead to confrontation or withdrawal by the betraying caregiver, threatening a necessary attachment relationship and thus the victim’s survival” (Reyes 76).

Acknowledging the problematic stage relationship could mean an awakening of an awareness that is uncomfortable for an audience member.

Reading these characters through trauma theory gives them more depth and helps explain their actions and reactions in the plot. The betrayed’s perception is the key to how the person is affected and reacts to perceived betrayals:
Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (Herman 51)

How well someone recovers from his or her response depends upon a myriad of factors. Some of the characters have little trouble handling the betrayals while others are emotionally destroyed.

Most demonstrate posttraumatic stress symptoms (if only temporarily) from both past traumas as well as the ones currently represented in the plays. Some examples of the kinds of symptoms that are seen include:

1. Narcissistic and other personality characteristics that reflect damage to the self-structure associated with trauma. [Richard III, King Lear, Hamlet, Médée]

2. Demoralization, dispiritedness, dysphoria, and existential doubt as to life’s meaning. [Hamlet, Ophelia, Ariane]


4. Fluctuating ego states; proneness to dissociation and lack of ego mastery. [Richard III, Hamlet, King Lear, Médée]
5. Hopelessness, helplessness, and self-recrimination; masochistic and self-destructiveness tendencies. [Ariane, Ophelia, Hamlet, Iphigénie]

6. Existential personal or spiritual angst; dread, despair, and a sense of futility in living. [Hamlet, Ophelia, Ariane]

7. Misanthropic beliefs, cynicism, and a view of the world as unsafe, dangerous, untrustworthy, and unpredictable. [Richard III, Hamlet, Médée] (Wilson 35) (Wilson et al., 2001)

These symptoms range across the plays and repeat, which represents an unconscious connectedness in both the themes and character psychology. The fact that the plays are products of two different countries and centuries helps solidify the idea that human experience holds a great deal of similarity and continuity. How those experiences manifest themselves fluctuates, but have a limited number of variants at the core (though outward appearances would suggest that the variation is quite expansive). Hence the categorization of my analysis into three main types of familial relationships that can cause the most severe reactions to betrayal trauma.

Couples Summary

The family framework rests upon the marital foundation of two people who have promised each other a lifelong bond of love and fidelity. Whether or not an “official” ceremony joining the two people has occurred, declaring such intentions to the world essentially unites them. “In psychological terms, the fundamental premise to the couple relationship is an underlying expectation, an anticipation of completeness, reconciliation,
wholeness” (Carotenuto 61). They are now an exclusive pairing who plan to “start a new life together” and everything that they do after that acknowledgment revolves around their union. A new image of the self begins to emerge that takes a person from an “I” mentality to a “we” mentality. Individualism is still present, but must now compromise itself for the good of the pairing. “This reciprocal subjugation, based on a complementary and indispensable distribution of roles, constitutes the foundation of the union in general and matrimony in particular” (Carotenuto 70). Some people find fidelity easier to accomplish than others. For them, “the existence of the ego is reinforced by the existence of the other (to whom we are passionately bound)” (Carotenuto 88). Problems inevitably arise when one half of the couple succeeds at the compromise while the other half does not.

Infidelity could be seen as the worst possible result of such an imbalance. “The inevitable lament after a betrayal is ‘Why did he (or she) do it?’ And here one of life’s most tragic, solitary, and painful experiences begins, with betrayed and betrayer face to face in a pathetic attempt to comprehend an event that no words can explain” (Carotenuto 84). The partners have promised each other exclusivity, but one of them has broken that contract by starting up a new romantic relationship before the dissolution of their current bond:

The autonomy demonstrated by the betrayer is doubly devastating because it obviously implies the creation of another dependence outside the rejected relationship. No one withdraws from a relationship without having already reinvested her energies elsewhere – whether she admits it or not. And that is enough to restore that internal balance which is always
a fundamental aspect of the life of the couple. Of course, the players in this game are not fairly matched, for the betrayer – captured by a new love – has found a new equilibrium, without having been even momentarily thrown off balance by the upsetting of the old one. (Carotenuto 86)

Infidelity fractures the betrayed’s life vision. Roles are shifted, the sense of self and of togetherness is altered, and expectations of the future are skewed.

The experience of betrayal can be all-consuming:

The intense, hard-wired nature of our bonds with others is evidenced dramatically in romantic, partnered, sexual relationships. It is in these relationships, and in our relationship partners, that we put our physical, emotional, and economic resources as well as our trust, and hopes for the future. And it is the loss or feared loss of these aspects that make infidelity such a powerful type of loss. (Boekhout, Hendrick, and Hendrick 359)

Thus betrayal can have a traumatizing effect because so much of the self has been put into the bond. “We have completely abdicated ourselves, and how dangerous this situation is becomes painfully clear when the other withdraws, leaving us in a state of defenselessness and deprivation” (Carotenuto 88). Trust in the other person is often irrevocably lost.

Both partners had already given up various things in order to have a joint future. “Death, of course, is not the only loss. Marital separation or divorce […] also involve losses […] . All change in life […] requires loss. We must give up or alter certain relationships, roles, plans, and possibilities in order to have others. And all losses require
mourning […]” (Walsh and McGoldrick 2). However, with this betrayal, only one person has been prepared to mourn the loss of the relationship and so is better prepared to deal with it. The betrayed’s reactions can run the gamut from unhappiness to utter devastation. The reactions also depend upon whether they subconsciously (or consciously, but pretended otherwise) knew what was happening before having to actively confront the issue. The level of betrayal blindness could lead to a lifetime pattern of denial that could be seen by the betrayed as being adaptive. Such reactions occur and fall under the diagnosis of betrayal trauma because:

- Pain, including the pain of detecting betrayal, motivates changes in behavior to promote survival.

- Sometimes the pain-motivated changes in behavior would be too dangerous; thus, pain and the information that prompts it sometimes need to be suppressed.

- Detecting betrayal is an adaptive activity that leads to pain, which in turn prompts a change in behavior, such as a shift in social alliances.

- Detecting betrayal can be too dangerous when the natural changes in behavior it provokes would threaten primary dependent relationships. In order to suppress the natural reaction to betrayal in such cases, information blockages in mental processing occur.

- The cognitive mechanisms that underlie these blockages are dissociations between normally connected, or integrated, aspects of processing and memory. (Freyd, Betrayal Trauma 129)
How strong the emotional bonds are and how much individuality has remained from before the union can have an affect on how much a person will fall into this pattern. “In passionate love, the other’s presence seems essential to the survival of our ego [. . .]” (Carotenuto 88) and possibly to the survival of life itself.

Such things could very well be influenced by lifestyle questions. How much is one partner reliant upon the other for basic needs such as food, shelter, etc? How have previous relationships with family and friends been affected by the union? Are there children involved? These questions add both practical and emotional layers to the issue. Perhaps the simple answer is this:

The fragility of unions would seem to be inevitable because desire, over time, is subject to wear, becomes eroded, and is eventually irreversibly dispersed by inexorable entropy. We betray our existence when we insist on denying that an object no longer responds to our needs. Abandoning ourselves to our emotions therefore means accepting being discarded as something no longer of use; it means discovering indifference in the eye of the other. (Carotenuto 50)

It means creating the possibility of being used and discarded when someone “better” comes along. It is never easy to go through a relationship dissolution, but the psychological fallout seems to be worse when another person immediately takes over the bond.

The relationship conflict in *Hamlet* could be seen as minor, but it is important enough to explore because it adds one more facet to Hamlet’s trauma. For Ophelia, the play shows what can happen to a distraught lover when forced to betray herself and her
lover. Infidelity is the betrayal at the heart of two of the plays: Ariane and Médée. The betrayer’s (Thésée/Jason) justification of the infidelity and the betrayed’s (Ariane/Médée) traumatic reactions are different between each play. In Iphigénie, the marital conflict is merely an offshoot of a much greater betrayal. King Lear and Richard III do have marital betrayals, but I consider them to be secondary because they merely add minor intrigue to the individual plots rather than causing any long term or harmful effects.

**Parent/Child Summary**

No matter what the domestic dynamic is, a healthy parent-child relationship is the most essential element to ensure that a positive family life will continue into the next generation. Children owe their existence to their parents, while parents see a kind of immortality in their children. “The child, in many ways, becomes the alter ego of the parent, and the parent tends to project her- or himself onto the child. Dependency, therefore, is a two-way street” (Sanders 163). This cycle sets up a kind of perpetual sense of obligation between the generations with the older dominating in the latter’s younger years and vice versa when the elders are nearing the end of their years. “Children provide a future for the parents. Besides the hopes, dreams, and expectations that are developed with each child’s birth, the future is also carried forth by the genes that protect the lineage of the family” (Sanders 163). Though it may seem like our current world is shifting away from these ideas, they still have a strong psychological hold on many families.

There are reasons why this concept of familial perpetuity continues:
Your parents are irreplaceable. You’ve known them longer than anyone else in your life. They took care of you. You depended on them throughout your childhood, and that dependence may have continued into adulthood. You literally owe your life and your survival to them. Your relationship with them – whether you think it was good or bad – was totally unique. All other relationships can be replaced in some way. [. . .] When a parent dies, an emotional umbilical cord is cut. (Akner and Whitney 58)

Such beliefs hold true whether the parents are biological or adoptive. “Because children are physically of their parents’ own flesh and blood, parents can see themselves in their child: their eyes, bodily contours, hair, gender. Even in cases of stepchildren or adoption, the mannerisms of the parent seen in the child are viewed as coming from the parent” (Sanders 163). There does seem to be a stronger emphasis on relationships with the former, but it really does come down to which parents a person identifies with as being their primary caregivers.

The other reason these bonds are important is that:

Your relationship with your parents is the one upon which all others are based. Your family is where you learn about love, emotions, expressions, and expectations. It’s where you are taught to be a social being. What you learn and practice with your family when you’re growing up prepares you for a lifetime of relating. [. . .] There’s always a connection, although it may not be obvious unless you examine your family’s dynamics carefully. (Akner and Whitney 58-59)
It could be argued that this reason is the more important of the two because of how everything else is affected by the relationship. Granted, as a person grows and matures, the parents’ influence can wane, but the psychological foundation has been laid down. Adult reactions could be seen as unconscious re-enactments of childhood responses to similar situations and interactions. The roles may be different, but the visceral responses could still be the same.

How each member of a family is treated is fundamental to the health of the relationships. As Bennett Simon points out, “[. . .] it is important to consider the role of empathy in the relationships among the generations. It is in the context of the family that the capacity to connect, to feel with and for another, is bred” (127). Healthy relationships ensure a sense of togetherness and desire to remain close and helpful to each other. They also influence how each child will treat his or her own spouse and children throughout the subsequent generations. Such attitudes will spill over into other relationships (friendships, work relationships, etc), but people grow up feeling as though their original family relationships should be the most important (at least until they start their own).

It always seems shocking to hear that a parent has betrayed a child or vice versa because it is ingrained into our collective psyche that the relationship between parents and children should be immutable. So, when one has betrayed the other it is the worse possible action that can be imagined on a personal level. It is a betrayal that cuts deeply on both ends and leaves lasting scars.

Ariane’s parent-child conflict occurs before the play opens, but, since the betrayal is mentioned in the play and it does factor into Ariane’s reactions during the action, the conflict is worth noting even though it is not as immediate an element as in the other
plays. It could be argued that Médée’s betrayal of her children is really crucial to the plot, and it is. However, the psychological ramifications are for herself and Jason. Since the boys are dead, there can be no analysis of how their mother’s betrayal psychologically affected them. However, *Richard III, Iphigénie, Hamlet, and King Lear* have this dynamic as a core element within the plot. *Richard III*’s parent/child betrayal may seem “minor,” but the abuse has been long-term and therefore affects his actions in the play. *Iphigénie* has a planned parent/child betrayal that affects character actions and interactions throughout the entire play, but this trauma could be seen as “minor” too since the main character is less traumatized by it than others. *Hamlet* is the main play where a parent betraying a child is a crucial element. In a sense, parental betrayal happens in three cases because both of Hamlet’s parents and his stepfather/uncle betray him. Finally, *King Lear* is the epitome of the parent/child betrayal act because the play shows what can happen both ways. Not only does the main family suffer the ignominies of such actions, but there is a secondary family portrayal that helps emphasize it. In *King Lear*, what is supposed to be the most secure relationship becomes, instead, one of the most devastating.

**Siblings Summary**

The relationship between partners and parents with their children may be the core domestic ties, but there are other familial relationships that can have a great deal of impact as well. In the past, “One’s own parents were not necessarily one’s primary advocates, since the chances of natural parents living to see their children through adulthood were slim. Thus, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins were called on for
support” (Miller and Yavneh 16). Today, more parents do survive to see their children grow into adulthood and have families of their own. While parental longevity, and also the fact that families can become more spatially scattered, may seem to negate the need for a lot of secondary familial involvement, there is still an emphasis on the importance of family (in the broader sense) in society.

The most important relationship after the parent-child connection is that of siblings. Sibling relationships can be very influential because they can often counteract or exacerbate bad parent-child relationships. If the parental support system fails, siblings often bond together for support. Depending upon the nature of the parental betrayal and the age difference between the siblings, the relationship between the siblings can often lessen the psychological effects. “Only love without betrayal in that early and crucial phase of our existence will instill that primary trust which later functions as a sort of platform, foundation, or container and is subsequently permanently interiorized for the difficult process of becoming” (Carotenuto 36). That love can often come from those closest in age to us: our siblings. This relational bond could also be true of cousins who are of a similar age and who can often stand in as surrogate (or added) siblings.

On the other hand, if extreme rivalry has been set up from the beginning, siblings can often be instigators of traumatic experiences. The various injuries that they inflict upon each other may seem very natural and easily forgotten. But if there is a deliberate and darker undertone to the rivalry, then this too is a betrayal of the familial bonds. What may seem to be minor abuses from the outside could have lasting effects. Passive aggression is another aspect of trauma: “Betrayal trauma theory proposes that the traumas that are most likely to be forgotten are not necessarily the most painful, terrifying, or
overwhelming ones (although they may have those qualities), but the traumas in which betrayal is a fundamental component” (Freyd. Betrayal Trauma 62-63). The betrayed may very well forget the various ills that have been done to them, but each hurt can have a lasting effect. As with other types of traumas, how much memory suppression exists varies among individuals. After all, “It is difficult to formulate conflict when affection and emotional relationships are involved. The motives, intentions, and even the observable behavioral patterns are multifaceted and layered” (Horowitz, Cognitive Psychodynamics 4). Intricacy is true of almost every human relationship, but familial expectations can make it even more complex.

*Iphigénie* and *Médée* do not have any sibling bonds that affect the action of either play. It should be noted that the former does come close with a sibling-like bond between Iphigénie and Ériphile but we do not know that they are cousins until the very end of the play. That knowledge does add an extra layer sadness to Ériphile’s sacrifice, but such feelings are muted through the lens of hindsight. *Médée* does mention a sibling betrayal but it occurred long before the play opens. There are repercussion echoes from the deed, but, for the most part, the act barely influences any of the action.

*Hamlet* is the only play I chose that deals with a brother-sister relationship, but it is very secondary and not one that includes betrayal. The fraternal relationship demonstrated within the play is never seen directly between the two brothers. *Hamlet* serves as “witness” to the fact that rivalry did exist between his father and uncle, but there is little textual support to explore the dynamic with anything more than a superficial glance (unless it is in how the revelation affects Hamlet). *Richard III* also has fraternal
relationships but the interaction between the three brothers is very limited and thus not sufficient enough to truly represent a balanced view of their sibling bonds.

*King Lear* shows more sibling interaction and, with it, more obvious friction. However, the betrayals that occur are so intrinsically tied to the parent/child betrayals that I chose to discuss them in that combined light. The most traumatizing sibling betrayal occurs in *Ariane*. Like with *King Lear*, this act is tied into an external betrayal, but it differs in that both the betrayer and betrayed are traumatized by the action. In a sense, Phèdre stands in for the audience on stage because she feels the same amount of pity as they do for her sister. No one is able to escape the aftershocks of the betrayals that take place, but it is likely that only the audience will come away with some kind of emotional catharsis that leaves them with a feeling of relief and a sense of hope for their lives.

**General Summary**

Overall, it is the nature of these plays that they all end on a mixed note of triumph and pain. “Love and joy are not the lack of pain, hurt, and fear. The world is simultaneously infinitely horrible and infinitely wonderful, and although it may be impossible for us to see beyond the horror or the wonder at any given time, one truth does not cancel out the other” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma* 194). Any joy usually comes at the expense of someone’s demise – whether mental or physical. But none of the characters who are the last to leave the stage do so unscathed. All are left with varying degrees of sorrow and pain from the events that have transpired. No one is able to escape the
aftershocks of the betrayals that take place even though the central families are the ones to pay the heaviest prices for it.
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