

Oedipal Complexities in Cormac McCarthy's The Stonemason and The Gardener's Son

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Edwin T. Arnold writes concerning Cormac McCarthy's stage play, *The Stonemason*, "Fathers and sons play an essential role in almost every McCarthy work, but nowhere is this sad conflict and misunderstanding so clearly delineated as in this drama" (153). In his article focusing on the "unmaking" of the play at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Arnold's performance leaves his insight cryptic: What does he mean by "this sad conflict and misunderstanding" between fathers and sons? Is the conflict Oedipal? Is there always misunderstanding? Is the relationship always sad, tragic? I should like to develop Arnold's insight into an analysis of the Oedipal complexities of not just *The Stonemason*, in which Arnold finds them "so clearly delineated," but also McCarthy's other published play, *The Gardener's Son*. Both are plays in which sons attempt to fill the void left by absent fathers.

Arnold cites a key line in *The Stonemason*: Ben Telfair seeks to learn about his dead father Big Ben by visiting Big Ben's mistress, Mary Weaver, who sagely asks young Ben, let's call him Benny for clarity's sake, "That's why you here aint it? Cause you caint get around that daddy? Caint get around that daddy" (110). Mary's repetition of the phrase underlines its importance. Indeed, McCarthy's novels often focus on a motif of father-son relations in which the son "caint get around" his daddy—to my mind, nowhere more poignantly than in *Blood Meridian*. As I argued in *Mavericks on the Border* (46-47), the judge's parable about the harness-maker and the traveler and their sons propounds a theory of the necessity for sons to wrestle with their fathers as part of their self-definition. The judge invokes the parable to explain the terrible legacy left by the Anasazi, for their descendants were simply incapable of competing with their great achievements. Thus those descendants were denied the chance to wrestle with their fathers, a chance the kid is finally vouchsafed in his struggle with the judge in the jakes. The judge intones of those denied,

The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony.
For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled
and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not
hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life.
He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising.
No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He

is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way. (145)

McCarthy's plays do not follow exactly the same pattern, but they do feature sons whose fathers absent themselves at crucial moments and thus create a void that their sons choose to fill—with tragic consequences. To begin with *The Stonemason*: Benny's father, Big Ben, runs a construction business. He has eschewed the simple craft of stonemasonry, practiced par excellence by his own father, Papaw, and adopted by his son, Benny. Big Ben wears flashy rings around the house; he wears fancy suits and a camel-hair coat; and he appears to have other expensive tastes. One of those tastes is Mary Weaver, and the family seems to know about her all along, not just when Benny visits her after his father's suicide. In a conversation with her mother, Benny's sister, Carlotta, bubbles the secret perilously close to the surface. They appear to be talking merely about Benny's wife Maven's seeking a profession (the law) outside of just raising babies. Then Carlotta slides from talking about Maven's absence to Benny's absence (working so many jobs) to her own absent husband, Landry, who has left her with a teenager to raise.

CARLOTTA You think men are born with rights that women don't have. That they can come and go like migratory birds and it's perfectly natural . . .

MAMA It is natural. Tryin to change nature. Women has babies. You caint get around that. That's the plan the good Lord laid down and you wont change it. You can make up you own plan if you want to, and you can read it in ruin.

CARLOTTA Well, it wasnt the good Lord's plan that I ever heard of for men to be gone all hours of the day and night.

MAMA You watch yourself girl. You hear? You just watch yourself. (44-45)

So when Big Ben, desperately seeking yet another loan from Benny, turns himself into the victim of desertion by Benny and Papaw—"Well pile it all on my head. You and Pap both just walked off and left the company. Just walked off and left it" (78)—and then concludes that he is alienated from his entire household—"Don't make no difference what I want. I aint goin to get it. Not even in my own house. Under my own roof. Never could and never will" (79)—we begin to infer the type of the wandering father. What he wanders into, besides a mistress, we are never quite sure, but he has accumulated debts he cannot pay--gambling debts by this big, flashy spender, perhaps. When he seeks \$6000 from Benny, he says he's in danger

of losing “everything” (78). The night he commits suicide, the stage direction instructs the actor thus: “*He takes an envelope out of his pocket and tears it in several pieces and puts the pieces on the table*” (102). Is it a letter from Mary breaking off their relationship? Is it a letter from the bank--or the mob threatening to foreclose on his business, his house, his “everything”? Indeed, after Big Ben’s suicide, the family loses the house and moves out to the farm (104, 113). It would seem that one of the aspects of Big Ben’s alienation is his being trammled up in capitalism, whose dark underside is often portrayed in twentieth-century literature (e.g. Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*) as the Underworld.

Whatever is the cause of Big Ben’s alienation and suicide, Benny utters a complaint typical of a son who watches his father wander and tries to convert what Arnold calls “misunderstanding” into understanding:

Because I thought of my father in death more than I ever did in life. And think of him yet. The weight of the dead makes a great burden in this world. And I know all of him that I will ever know. Why could he not see the worth of that which he had put aside and the poverty of all he hungered for? Why could he not see that he too was blest? (111)

Benny is thinking not only of Big Ben’s family as value “put aside” but also the trade, the craft of stonemasonry, idealized throughout. Ben has tried to save his father from himself by loaning him money--up to “eleven thousand dollars,” he tells Maven, even as she protests, “Well I don’t think you should let him take advantage of you just because he’s your father” (81). Benny’s response is not an answer but rather something of an excuse: “I know. Every Friday is a shoot-out. You don’t know. If you think you hear a lot of poormouthing around here you ought to hear him on the job” (81). Why is every Friday a “shoot-out” and with whom? Probably his workers on payday as he tries to hold them at bay because he cannot meet the payroll.

But Benny does more than bail his father out financially. He assumes the role of the head of the household when he searches for his sister’s missing son, Soldier, and Mama remonstrates with her husband over it:

BIG BEN Where he goin to look for the boy at? Police aint got no sense. Teachers aint got no sense. Aint nobody got any sense but him.

MAMA Well at least he tryin to do somethin.

BIG BEN What that suppose to mean?

MAMA Don’t mean nothin. Mean he tryin, that’s all.

BIG BEN He just showin out. (69)

Big Ben's last line here shows his jealousy and resentment of his son for having supplanted him as patriarch.

Benny has filled the void left by Big Ben in that he becomes the patriarch who loves Carlotta and attempts to replace her missing husband by assuming the role of surrogate father with Soldier. Carlotta accuses him of—and he confesses later to—thinking he can “fix everything” (60;85). Apparently he tries to “fix” things with Soldier by sending him money yet keeping his status and whereabouts secret from the rest of the family. Instead of doing anyone any favors, Benny's course of action has no beneficial effect on Soldier, who OD's waiting for Benny to show up with more money, and it has a disastrous effect on his relationship with his sister, who blames him for meddling. Was Benny's behavior worse than just supporting Soldier? Was he bribing him to stay away from the family? In their conversation the night before Soldier OD's, Soldier asks for more money because he's getting married. Benny asks if his fiance knows Soldier has killed someone. He appears to be referring to the killing of the Newman boy he has asked Soldier's friend Jeffrey about earlier in Act III, scene iii. He says to Soldier, “You were involved in it” (116). He must have sent money to Soldier to help him escape the law. Why else would Soldier comment, “You somethin, aint you? What, you think you goin to blackmail me back?” (117). The checks Benny has sent over the years represent a kind of blackmail by Soldier, then, because Benny himself broke the law by abetting a fugitive from justice. His wife, the lawyer Maven, finally gets Benny to realize he has done something worse: by concealing his being alive, much less his whereabouts, and by keeping him at bay, Benny has exiled Soldier from his place in the family. Maven reminds Benny of his own philosophy, that even though he doesn't, he can't “deserve” that place, now in the shape of being buried with his family, “Does he have to?” (126).

Perhaps Benny's most egregious offense in his usurpation of the role of his father is that he supplants him with his own father—a supplanting that also removes Benny from Oedipal struggle with his own father. At the end Benny comes to the conclusion that “we have nothing to sustain us but the counsel of our fathers” (132). Yet by leapfrogging his own father and seeking not his father's but his grandfather's “counsel,” he has displaced his father from his rightful place vis-à-vis both Papaw *and* Benny. That place may involve “counsel,” but usually such counsel comes after Oedipal struggle. With regard to Papaw, Big Ben has been displaced. He is on the outside. His father has become a “frozen god,” and Big Ben apparently cannot carry out his Oedipal rebellion until after his father's death. Nor does he ever wrestle with his son, because Benny will not stand up to him, rebel against him, refuse to lend him money. Instead, while Big Ben is so alienated as finally to commit suicide and while Benny suffers from Oedipal guilt

that he has not done enough to save his father (Benny speaks)—

If I'd ransomed everything and given it all to him would it
have saved him?

No.

Was I obligated to do so?

Yes.

Why did you not? (105)

Benny is allowed to nestle comfortably in the patriarch's bosom at the end of the play in the scene with Papaw's ghost, "Shaped in the image of God," God the Father, God the Maker (133).

If by the end of the play Benny himself has finally made this peace with the cosmos, it is not through listening to the counsel of his own father, whom he never really knew—unless the shifting to the second person in his apparent dialogue with himself over his obligation to his father represents an intervening voice of conscience as superego, as father. If this last suggestion be true, is McCarthy being too cryptic? If the ghost of his grandfather finally releases him, it is only because he has arrived at the wisdom he shares with the audience: that we must ourselves listen to the counsel of our fathers; that we must not be self-righteous, as Benny has been; that the ultimate Father (of Benny's dream) requires that we imitate his "Grace," which "is much like love and you cannot deserve it" (131)--anymore than Soldier or Uncle Selman's murderer or even the stonemasons themselves. The ultimate apparently absent father in the play, Jeffrey, responds to Benny's question about who he thinks is running the world, "It look to you like somebody *runnin* it?" (74). He is an inscrutable Father, in whose grace one must simply trust implicitly, for although "Nothing is finally understood," one must have faith that the Patriarch "would [. . .] not ever fail" us (131, 133). The patriarchal ghost at the end is Papaw as avatar of all the fathers--including Uncle Selman, even Big Ben, who will not be denied the place he too cannot deserve, who "too [is] blest"--and behind him the ultimate patriarchal superego. Thus the Oedipal complexities in McCarthy's *The Stonemason* ultimately resolve themselves into McCarthy's usual, cryptic theodicy. Ironically, it is a theodicy that is ultimately escapist, nostalgic for a pre-capitalist patriarchy where workers are not alienated from their labor. Papaw and Benny represent an atonement (etymologically, *at-one-ment*) that overcomes alienation and subverts the master-slave dialectic by eschewing Big Ben's world of trying to play the system and instead embracing the labor that "grows daily in skill and wisdom" while "the [capitalist] master comes to suffer the inner impoverishment of the idle" (31).

McCarthy's *The Gardener's Son* also concludes in cryptic theodicy, but its critique of capitalism takes a different form--one of open, Oedipal rebellion transformed finally into sacrifice. Over the play hovers the historical question, why did Robert McEvoy kill James Gregg? One important reason lurks throughout: James is probably responsible for the accident that cost Robert his leg--even though the Old Timekeeper, a company man, denies it (4). This symbolic castration is caused by a twin brother of sorts, for they are sons of twinned patriarchs: the one, William Gregg, founder, progenitor of this factory town, Graniteville. The other patriarch is Patrick McEvoy, who has left his no-longer productive farm to join the migration of workers to company towns beginning in the Reconstruction South.

This twinning seems related to the mythic conflict between twins analyzed by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*. The violence between twins represents a societal implosion, threatening endless reciprocal violence if it is not halted by the sacrifice of a scapegoat. The violence between the patriarchs--a violence destined by the very nature of the antithesis between management and labor--is displaced onto their sons in the absence of their fathers.

Both Robert and James rebel against these absent patriarchs. Each rejects what his father stands for. At William Gregg's funeral, the eulogy delivered by an unnamed Speaker (whom McCarthy tentatively identifies in the *dramatis personae* as "Perhaps one of the stockholders" [viii]) apotheosizes William as the benevolent patriarchal capitalist, cloaking him in the rhetoric of one of Thomas Carlyle's Captains of Industry:

[T]he crowning glory of his life and the true benefactors of his labors are here in the community which he established. [. . .] To see what he has wrought, the neat homes, the churches and schools, the gardens and the lovely grounds and last but not least the massive factory structure with its beautiful and perfect machinery, these things seem created almost by magic. (18-19)

One is tempted to wonder whether McCarthy had not seen Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). In that classic film, however, the rebellious son ultimately reconciles his industrialist father with the workers. In McCarthy's play James rebels against his father's ostensible (and ostentatious) benevolence. Symbolically, he has let the gardens go to seed; saying crassly to his Timekeeper, "get them out of here," "back to wherever the hell they came from" (23), he sends back to nothing croppers and sharecroppers who have left their farms and gathered their belongings to come to the company town for work; and his cynicism is reflected in his distorting Scripture when he

dumps these dispossessed upon the hypocritical Mrs. Cornish at the church: “Tell her some of God’s seed has fallen on barren ground” (24). It is James (as well as Mrs. Cornish) who has no ears to hear the true Gospel message of charity. Thus James drives a stake into the (supposedly) benevolent heart of his father and his enterprise. Looked at another way, James kills his father’s ideology, revealing beneath it the naked rapacity of capitalism.

Robert, in the meanwhile, witnesses James’s callous dismissal of the uprooted farmers, over which he obviously broods. Such brooding leads him to resist capitalist ideology, embodied in the status symbols of its class system. In narrating an exchange at their dinner table, his clueless father apologizes for him: “[L]ittle sister piped up, said: I wisht we lived in a better house. And he just looked at her and he said: That wouldnt make you no better from what you are. I dont know what to make of him” (29). Robert’s brooding finally leads him to perform his first act of rebellion: he runs away, exiling himself from the supposedly idyllic “community” William Gregg has built, complete with gardens and orchards. Robert implicitly rebels against his father’s complicity with the system. Upon his return he discovers his father’s complete sell-out to the Gregg enterprise, now far less idyllic under the ruthless management of James, heir to his deceased father. The gardens have turned to weeds, the gardener, Patrick, meekly converted to factory laborer. Robert picks up the mantle of responsibility from his father. And that responsibility means standing up to James.

Robert has returned because he was summoned by his sister, Martha, to the bedside of his dying mother. Mrs. McEvoy has died before he arrives, and Robert’s first assumption of his father’s role is to stop her burial on company ground: asserting “She dont belong to the mill” (35), Robert chases away her gravediggers. He further rejects the community by purging his house of professional mourners hired by his father. He then complains to his sister about his father’s capitulation: “He’s got the money. He could of took her up there on the train” [that is, back to the family farm and its graveyard] (38).

Robert looks for his father high and low, obviously to confront him and change his mind about the disposition of Mrs. McEvoy. Somewhat like Faulkner’s Rider in “Pantaloons in Black,” he encounters a group of good ol’ boys gambling and drinking. They ask if the McEvoyos are all grown up, and Robert mentions the little sister of the father’s anecdote, Maryellen, now eleven. With Maryellen’s presence having been evoked, the men almost immediately joke that the only way to get on at the mill these days “is to get your wife knocked up by the boss” (48). Not only wives but sisters are grist for James’s mill. If Robert earlier was not on set to witness James’s attempt to seduce his sister Martha with a \$10-gold piece, he has certainly heard about it, for he says to her after James’s death, as if in justification, “I *know*

he insulted you. The people in this town know what he was. They didn't want to hear it. They was not soul one would stand up and . . .” (81).

The most important soul to stand up would have been Martha's father, but he did not, probably for fear of losing their little livelihood. Hunting his father, an inebriated Robert ends up in the mill offices, where he encounters James. Robert's motivations percolate throughout the scene. One of them must be revenge for the oh-so-apparent loss of his leg as he leans on his crutch. Another is James's heartlessness, his objectification of his workers. James says not one word of consolation about Robert's mother--something Mrs. Gregg would have made it her business to know. James claims to know Robert's father, but Robert insists he does not, not, the implication is, in the impersonal world of James's era. No more gardeners, James says, “We're not in the flower business” (53)--perhaps another stinging reminder of Robert's mother's funeral, as well as the diminution and humiliation--and castration--of his father.

The maimed Robert stands up to James repeatedly, defying him, going so far as the fighting words of calling James a liar for saying that he, Robert, had not just left his job as janitor at the mill but had been fired for stealing. Robert upbraids James for his arrogance in thinking “you can say anything you want about people” with impunity (55). Called a “liar” a second time, James rises into typical macho confrontation, with a cripple on crutches, but quickly resorts to the capitalist's ethos of offering Robert money. The problem is he repeats the degrading gesture with Martha, throwing a \$10-gold piece on the table. All of the hatred associated with the humiliation of class breaks out of Robert's look, and the frightened James goes for the gun in his desk. Robert shoots him where poetic justice dictates, in his lubricious abdomen. Robert has castrated his rival, momentarily seizing the phallus from the agent of hegemonic power.

While Robert has been thus acting the role of the surrogate patriarch, defending not only his family but his fellow workers and his class, his father, the displaced, dispossessed patriarch, has been desperately seeking him to prevent him from so acting. The senior McEvoy happens on the scene just as his son fires the last shot into James. The stage directions are instructive:

McEvoy's father has stopped a few yards down the street from where his son is holding the pistol. The clatter of machinery in the background suddenly comes to a halt. There is an immense silence. (57)

It is as if Robert has shot the factory itself, the very system, in the abdomen, bringing capitalism's exploitation of its workers to a temporary halt. In the

resulting silence, father meets son:

Figures appear at the door of the mill. They are all watching Mr McEvoy as he approaches his son. He is walking very straight and dignified and he is crying. He holds out his hand for the pistol. McEvoy is breathing hard. His face changes from hatred to anguish. The father holds out his hand for the pistol. McEvoy turns the pistol on his father for a moment. (57)

McCarthy has called for this scene to be performed very ritualistically: the straightness, the dignity, the quiet crying. Robert's subconsciousness takes over for a moment as he ritually enacts his Oedipal rebellion. But rebellion begins the slow process of being turned into sacrifice, as the father reasserts his position and role:

The older man takes yet another step toward his son. He is almost close enough now to put his arm around his son. He is crying quietly. McEvoy lowers his head. He hands the pistol to his father. They stand there, the boy looking down at the ground and the father looking at the boy, holding the revolver clumsily by the barrel. (57-58)

The last detail is remarkable. The patriarch re-appropriates the phallus. And he, in turn, returns it to the system that will now judge Robert.

This second castration of Robert leaves him impotent in his trial, unable to speak to defend himself, unable even to offer James's character and his assault upon the company women as extenuating circumstances. As Melville has Captain Vere say about Billy Budd after he has killed Claggert, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (101). Robert is no angel. But he is an agent of justice like Billy. Yet why must the agent hang? Nothing seems to come of it. Mrs. Gregg, after actually allowing herself to really see one of "these people" for the first time in her life (73), ends up misinterpreting as conniving Martha's attempt to convince her she would *not* have testified about James's assault upon her virtue. Martha herself seems to lose her moral bearings, and there's no great, uplifting vision through her at the end of the play, when Mrs. Gregg's grandson shows up to talk to her.² The grandson has come hoping Martha, as the only one who knows, would tell him what really happened, why Robert killed James, but Martha responds, "I dont know why Bobby done what he done" (92). And Robert himself, before his execution, remains isolated, alienated from the community, as emblemized when Louis refuses to acknowledge

his greeting (79).

In short, the ending of the play seems purposeless, godless. Earlier, Robert has snapped at Martha, “The good book says all men are brothers but it dont seem to cut no ice, does it?” (39). Mrs. Gregg’s black coach driver gives Robert advice on what to do the night of his mother’s wake by relating that he himself got drunk and lay in his own vomit: “That’s what I thought of the hand of the Lord” (43). And W. J. Whipper, Robert’s black Yankee lawyer, tells Patrick McEvoy cynically, “If men were no more just than God there’d be no peace in this world. Everywhere I look I see men trying to set right the inequities that God’s left them with” (67).

Yet thanks to Robert’s surrogate patriarchal actions, his father seems momentarily freed to defy the system himself. He defies the company *and* Catholic doctrine by cremating Mrs. McEvoy’s rotting corpse, a kind of ritual immolation. And Robert is dressed in a white gown for the ceremony of his execution, “*like a priest being dressed for a sacrament*” (84). In other words, however ignorant everyone is of the significance of the actions, the play appears to culminate in sacrifices of sorts. To whom or what are these sacrifices made? To another apparently absent Father, whose ways remain inscrutable? In Robert McEvoy, do we have a figure for a son who is a scapegoat in the place of the father? In a fallen garden?

Let us return to Whipper’s statement about God’s justice. Perhaps God leaves justice unsatisfied in the world in order to provide, as Renaissance Christians believed, a sign of the need for an afterlife. But 17th-century Archbishop of Dublin James Ussher, for example, would argue that it would be an afterlife that fulfills our hunger for justice (147-48). McCarthy’s afterlife as adumbrated in these two plays seems different. In her senility at the end of *The Gardener’s Son* (though McCarthy’s dramatic personae characterizes Old Martha’s eyes as suggesting “a liveliness that is childlike but not quite mad” [x]) Martha speculates, “I wonder if people are not all the same to [God]. Just souls up there and no names. Or if he cares what all they done” (92). Perhaps the ultimate meaning of this play, like that of *The Stonemason*, is that God’s grace forms no part of a calculus of justice. McCarthy seems to hint at a belief in universal salvation, where the Atonement--alluded to only once and only in passing in these plays when Benny quotes Papaw as saying “the only blood you’ll ever need is the blood of your redeemer” (66)³--can make even alienated, even murderous fathers and sons *at one*, bringing what Arnold calls their “sad conflict” to closure. But it is a closure that is ultimately eschatological, beyond the economic injustices of this world, which both Papaw and W. J. Whipper imply are part of the very ineluctable fabric of the world. McCarthy’s mysterious god builds them in, just like Oedipal rivalry, so humans can have something formidable with which to wrestle.

NOTES

1. This lacuna in dramatic action is the kind of flaw Peter Josyph highlights in his condemnation of *The Stonemason* as theater.
2. For analysis of Martha, see Luce 88-89.
3. For analysis of some of the allegorical implications of the play, see Luce 78.

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