

“Accursed Tongue” and “Frightful Hearing”:  
The Incest Narrative and Strategies of Discourse

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This dissertation considers incest in early modern drama by such writers as Shakespeare, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher, Tourneur, and Ford, and places their incest narratives within a theoretical framework derived from conflicting treatments of the topic by such commentators as Aquinas, Maimonides, Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze. The contenting voices, both fictional and theoretical, of this debate contribute as much to the formulation of a general incest narrative by what some have left out of their discourse as by what others have kept in. Their comments and their silences reveal a struggle with language wherein the words that are employed deny the emotional and physical violence of incestuous sexuality.

For some who discuss incest, or embody it in drama, the threat of breaking secrecy requires declaring war on speech. Despite such efforts, the incest story defies injunctions of silence. This dissertation focuses on the discursive strategies that theorists and characters have either chosen or have had forced upon them. Speakers rarely evade the consequences of speech about incest. Theirs is not a narrative to be taken lightly, that can be written away, or that can be ascribed to so many that it no longer applies to anyone.

Chapter I is an overview of the incest dialogue across historical and generic boundaries. Chapter II focuses on drama as a special case of a general phenomenon arising from the difficulties attending the disclosure or embodiment of incestuous desire by speech. Chapter III refutes Bruce Boehrer’s argument that the subject of incest was invented by Henry VIII to articulate a discourse on succession anxiety. Challenging Marc Shell’s notion of universal incest, Chapter IV concentrates on Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure and King Lear as illustrations of the discrepancy between incest utterance and intentionality. The final two chapters focus on dramas whose central characters engage in or contemplate incestuous acts. Chapter V considers Beaumont and Fletcher’s Arbaces (A King and No King) and Ford’s Giovanni (‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore) as victims of their own speech, while Chapter VI examines Shakespeare’s Pericles and the daughter of Antiochus as victims of someone else’s speech.