

Who Ate My Baby? Crimes of the Oral Father

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Taking as a horrifying example a 1993 triple child homicide in West Memphis, Arkansas, in which bitemark evidence figures prominently, this article explores some ramifications of “the Oral Father”—a figure of paternity associated with the most primitive appetite and aggressivity. The Oral Father is the preoedipal, anti-(or ante-) genital paternal analog of that familiar image of polymorphous maternity known as the “Phallic Mother.” Although the image of the Phallic Mother has, almost from the inception of psychoanalysis, embodied the tropology and aetiology of perversion, she cannot and should not represent alone the dark side of the parental unconscious. Furthermore, psychoanalysis has always used the Phallic Mother to represent the eros of the (usually male) child (of whatever age), not that of the parent. The Oral Father does not work alone; the term refers not only to an actual father or custodial male who breaches what should be the

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By far the most complete and accessible source for information on this case is the website www.3.org, set up and maintained by the West Memphis Three Support Fund, namely, Kathy Bakken, Grove Pashley, and Burk Sauls.

boundaries between himself and his children in particular ways, but to the entire network of paternalist, patriarchal, *oedipal* practices, discourses, and institutions that support and cover for him. In too many cases, however, physical evidence testifies to the fact that little boys have reason to fear being eaten up, and even emasculated, by their father—his appetite is not a figment of their imagination.

On October 19, 1999, “a forensic dental expert told a Brisbane court” that “digital technology had matched a bite mark found on a baby [murdered over 25 years ago] with the teeth of a man who had been acquitted of the crime” (Anonymous, 1999). That man was the baby’s father.¹ One physician has called bite marks in children “harbingers of severe child abuse” (Sperber, 1989), a strange epithet, since bitemarks document damage already done, even though worse may follow; they are integumental craters left by the “emotional explosions” (Walter, 1984, p. 26) triggered in parental figures by their apparently intolerable connection to beings to whom they owe nurture. Richard A. Walter (1984), a prison psychologist, has noted that an abusing parent often “inflicts bite marks to areas that are associated with cuddling and nurturance, . . . locations where the child best responds to reassuring tenderness,” such as the cheeks and face, buttocks, and groin (p. 26).

In this essay I explore, by way of a brief discussion of a triple child homicide in West Memphis, Arkansas, some ramifications of “the Oral Father”—a figure of paternity associated with the most primitive appetite and aggressivity. If, as Slavoj Žižek (1991), has argued, the “‘anal father’ . . . lurks behind” the phallic one (p. 56), then the oral father lurks behind him. The Oral Father is the preoedipal, anti- (or ante-) genital paternal analog of that familiar image of polymorphous maternity known

¹ His wife had left him after she noticed bite marks and bruises on the baby’s inner thighs three or four times after the father had changed baby Deirdre’s diapers behind closed doors. Deirdre had been taken from her cot; her body was later found atop a toilet block at Limestone Park Ipswich, west of Brisbane. (The first press release wrongly stated that the murder occurred 24 years ago.)

as the “Phallic Mother.” Although the image of the Phallic Mother has, almost from the inception of psychoanalysis, embodied the tropology and aetiology of perversion, she cannot and should not represent alone the dark side of the parental unconscious. Furthermore, psychoanalysis has always used the Phallic Mother to represent the eros of the (usually male) child (whatever his age), not that of the parent. Similarly, when Freud (1926) mentioned the archetype of the cannibal father, he located this terrifying figure in the child’s anxious imagination:

[Y]ou will no doubt be surprised to hear how often little boys are afraid of being eaten up by their father. (And you may also be surprised at my including this fear among the phenomena of sexual life.) But I may remind you of the mythological tale which you may still recall from your schooldays of how the god Kronos swallowed his children. . . . You will be no less surprised to hear that male children suffer from a fear of being robbed of their sexual organs by their father, . . . The same Kronos who swallowed his children also emasculated his father Uranus, and was afterwards himself emasculated in revenge by his son Zeus [pp. 211-212].

In too many cases, however, physical evidence testifies to the fact that little boys have reason to fear being eaten up, and even emasculated, by their father and that his appetite is not a figment of their imagination.

The Oral Father does not work alone; I mean the term Oral Father to refer not only to an actual father or custodial male who breaches what should be the boundaries between himself and his children in particular ways, but to the entire network of paternalist, patriarchal, *oedipal* practices, discourses, and institutions that support and cover for him. (This network includes women who serve.)² Despite, or perhaps because of, our idealistic expectation that the justice system ferret out, expose, and punish wrongdoing even when committed within

² Actually, infanticide is the one category in which women are as likely as men to appear, and I do not mean to suggest that women’s crimes against (their) children are all directly instigated by men.

the intimate confines of the family, that same system has the capacity and even the motive to ignore, protect, and divert our attention from such crimes. As Luce Irigaray (1985) has written, “law organizes and arranges the world of fantasy at least as much as it forbids, interprets, and symbolizes it” (p. 38).

To epitomize the role law plays in organizing, if not globalizing, paternal fantasy, I some years ago proposed Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal psychiatrist at the center of Jonathan Demme’s 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, as the contemporary fictional prototype of the Oral Father.³ Hannibal Lecter caricatures phallocracy as clandestinely primitive, voracious, a muzzled mouth in phallic clothing, as much pre-oedipal as oedipal. He reveals the penal system and its various supportive mechanisms to comprise an institutionalized imaginary masquerading as what we sometimes too hygienically call “the symbolic.” Lecter symbolizes the point of intersection or relay between “private” subjective desire and public policy. The long arm of the law reaches into, and out from, his bowels.

In the movie, mentor and teacher Hannibal the Cannibal is a crucial node along what Freud (1919) called in “The Uncanny” a “father-series” (p. 232) for phallic daughter Clarice Starling, the daughter of a local marshall who wanted to become an FBI agent. Thanks to his superior identificatory powers (as a cannibal), Lecter knows something about the law it does not know about itself, and about the desire of people like Clarice Starling to serve the law. The viewer knows that Clarice lives only because Lecter chooses to let her live; he prefers coaching the fledgling Starling to eating her. He helps her to gain advancement, outdo her beloved father, who was only a small-town cop, and attain the status of Subject with privileged access to the patriarchal “symbolic.” For Starling and for us, Lecter is a fortunate fiction, an ideal; the real-life Oral Father destroys his children, annihilating what should be the space of separation between him and them that is constitutive of subjectivity; he forecloses the symbolic from the real.⁴

³I first presented this idea in a talk, “Wearing the Fetish on the Other Foot: Hannibal Lecter as the Cannibal Father,” at the Semiotic Society of America, Chicago, October 31, 1992.

⁴I make this argument at greater length in a reading of the representation of father-son rape in death metal music in Ian (1997).

Insofar as the power relations within a family, especially between parental authorities and children, are political relations, Lecter thus represents one of those “junctures where [the] micropolitics and macropolitics” of the family and the larger culture “intersect” (Connolly, 1999, p. 149). The state, perhaps most obviously when it investigates crimes against children, occupies another such juncture.

At around 1:45 P.M. on May 6, 1993, in West Memphis, Arkansas, the search for three eight-year-old boys last seen bike-riding the previous evening toward a wooded area known as Robin Hood Hills, came to an abrupt end. While searching the area, Sergeant Mike Allen of the West Memphis police department stumbled into the two- and -a-half-foot deep water of a drainage ditch and found himself standing on the drowned corpse of Michael Moore. At about 2:45, Detective Bryn Ridge lifted Moore’s naked body up out of the “bayou” and placed it on the bank. Then he crouched back down into the creek and kept searching until he had found the bodies of Chris Byers and Stevie Branch.⁵ All three boys were nude and had been hogtied with shoelaces, left wrist to left ankle, right wrist to right ankle. All three showed signs of traumatic injury to the head. The left side of Stevie Branch’s face “was laid open from cheek to jaw” (Reel, Perrusquia, and Sullivan, 1995, p. 50). Chris Byers had in addition been sexually mutilated. His “testicles and part of his penis were literally ripped off. . . . In addition, [Byers’s] entire genital area . . . was covered in gouge-like wounds” (Stidham, 1994).

Had the West Memphis police responded rationally and lawfully to this discovery, they would have left the bodies where they were found, in the water, so that the creek could be drained and the crime scene documented without disturbing or falsifying the condition and disposition of the bodies (Stidham, 1994). Instead, the police overlooked, altered, or destroyed invaluable physical evidence, such as body temperature and degree of rigor or livor mortis, which would have helped establish time and manner of death. “No record was made of how the bodies were positioned,” or what the creek

⁵ Source: Handwritten, unsigned, uninitialed six-page investigative report labeled “Crime Scene Notes” and dated May 6, 1993.

bottom was like.⁶ By the time Kent Hale, the coroner (actually a funeral director, not an M.D.), arrived two hours later, the creek bed and banks had been thoroughly “trampled” by the numerous search party, while the little bodies been left lying in the sun, unprotected from the elements or the detritus of the activity around them. When they were finally placed in bags, there was no way to tell how various stray items that also found their way into those bags had gotten there.

Dr. Frank J. Peretti of the Arkansas State Crime Lab later examined the bodies but left such cursory records that there is no way even to know how long he spent with each. He found insect casings in the eyes of at least one of the corpses, which, properly interpreted, could have helped estimate the time and location of the murders but did not call in a forensic entomologist. He saw serrated, ovoid wounds that he knew might be human bitemarks—he was doubtless aware that bitemarks are as singular and identificatory as fingerprints (Ted Bundy was convicted on the basis of a bitemark)—but did not swab for the presence of saliva, which would have contained DNA capable of identifying the assailant(s). He did not take three-dimensional photos, or excise tissue to preserve for subsequent examination.⁷ Hale had noted that the boys’ anuses were dilated, indicating possible anal penetration; evidently he was unaware that the anus “is always open and dilated in deceased individuals” (Turvey, 1999, p. 368).

If the West Memphis police had responded in an informed and reasoned way to their discovery, they would, having first secured the crime scene and protected the bodies, have interrogated individually the parents of all three boys. Those investigators would have known that 59% of homicide victims under the age of 10 are murdered by their parents, more often than not the father; 54% of these victims are boys (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995). They would have known that four out of five

⁶Testimony of Manhattan medical pathologist, Dr. Joseph Cohen, at Damien Echols’s Rule 37 hearing October 28, 1998.

⁷ Peretti’s testimony, Rule 37 hearing, March 19 1998, in which he also claimed that, during his initial investigation and despite the fact that he did not think these were bitemarks, he called in Arkansas’s self-appointed Chief Forensic Odontologist to similarly opine but left no record of this transaction.

children under age 12 murdered by their parents had been previously abused by the parent who killed them. Furthermore, they would have found it significant that Chris Byers—the boy whose genitals had been cut off—had been “overkilled,” that is, been paid extra time and attention by the killer(s), indicating that they knew and had a special interest in him. Had the police done some checking, they would have recalled that the biological father of Chris Byers had been removed from the home because he was sexually abusing Chris, that Chris’s mother had expressed concern that he was being abused currently, and that Chris’s record of starting fires and otherwise acting violent indicated trouble.⁸

On the other hand, the facts that John Mark Byers had long served as a drug informant to local police, that he shared their religious beliefs and a fondness for hunting, and that he was the step-parent of a viciously murdered boy, seemed to militate against their seriously considering him as suspect.⁹ On May 19th, 1993, two weeks after the boys disappeared, Detective Bryn Ridge interviewed Byers. Reading the interview, however, it seems rather that Byers was interviewing Detective Ridge:

Byers: Just tell me one thing.

Ridge: Okay.

Byers: Man to man, you tell [me] man to man, I don’t care on the record or off the record. . .

Ridge: Uh-huh.

⁸This mother was no angel, as will be apparent to any one who views the documentaries *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations* (see note 14) and hears her spew homophobic hatred in various directions. Since the making of the first film she died “under mysterious circumstances” while napping with her husband. In scenarios in which her husband is a suspect, she is a likely accomplice.

⁹The police seem to have been equally uninterested in any other logical suspect. The same night that locals were searching for the three missing boys, an employee of a Bojangles chicken joint about 1/4-mile away called the police to report that a bloody, muddy, muttering man had wandered into the ladies’ room and stayed there for around 45 minutes. When Officer Regina Meeks arrived at the scene, she passed through the drive-thru, never leaving her squad car to investigate. By the time officers did trouble to enter the ladies’ room the next day, the staff had cleaned up most of the mud and blood, and the police then, incredibly, “lost” the samples they did take.

Byers: You know I didn't have anything to do with this murder of my son and those other two boys.

Ridge: Man to man, I know that.¹⁰

The police did not require evidence, because they already “knew” who did it: an idiosyncratic local teenager whom everyone thought of as “weird.” The same day the bodies were found, “as he watched Bryn Ridge pull the bodies from the ditch,” juvenile officer Steve Jones became convinced that “Damien Echols, that dark, moody teenager from Lakeshore [trailer park], had finally killed somebody. Jones and his boss, Crittenden County chief juvenile officer Jerry B. Driver, had spent the better part of the past year investigating Damien” (Reel et al., 1995, pp. 92–93). They had confiscated poetry he had written and notebooks in which he wrote lines from Shakespeare and other writers they found suspect. It seemed that whenever a crime occurred within a radius of 100 miles they beat a path to Damien's door.

With his black hair, his habit of wearing black tee shirts under a black trench coat (before the heyday of the trench coat mafia), and what they took to be his bad attitude, they readily believed him to be one of the many “satanists” and “devil worshippers” they and the rest of their community imagined to be operating in the area. Jones and Driver questioned him at around noon on Friday, May 7, “due to his alleged ‘cult involvement.’”¹¹ On Wednesday, May 19, the police detained Jessie Misskelley, Jr., a mildly retarded 17 year old with an IQ of 72. He did not really know Damien. They tricked him into thinking he had failed a lie detector test and questioned him without the presence of a parent or attorney for about 12 hours, of which the police taped only about 20 minutes. What they got was a “confession” in which Jessie implicated himself, Damien Echols, and Damien's friend, Jason Baldwin, a 17-year-old local boy with artistic talent and a fondness for heavy metal bands. Jessie's confession, it would become clear, was factually wrong on detail after detail despite, or thanks to, the obvious coaching of police.¹²

¹⁰ See “Documents,” <http://www.wm3.org/html/documents.html>.

¹¹ From the chronology of the case available at the [wm3.org](http://www.wm3.org) website.

¹² In return for the help they offered with some outstanding warrants of hers, police had been led by a woman named Vicky Hutcheson to Jessie Misskelley, who she claimed had attended a witches' orgy with her and Damien Echols.

On Friday, February 4, 1994, solely on the basis of this coerced confession, Jessie Misskelley was sentenced to life in prison with no parole. On Tuesday, April 18, at the end of a separate trial, Jason Baldwin was sentenced to life in prison plus 40 years with no possibility of parole, while Damien was sentenced to death by lethal injection. No physical evidence whatsoever linked any of the three to the site where the bodies were found, to the dead boys, or to the crime.¹³ What prosecutors showed the court to persuade them that Jason and Damien were devil worshipping killers was, for example, a bag containing 11 black tee shirts taken from Jason's home, two ordinary sticks taken from Robin Hood Hills weeks after the bodies; some books Damien had read by such writers as Stephen King and a piece of paper on which he had doodled the name Aleister Crowley.¹⁴

Such items, combined with the testimony of a Ph.D. from a now defunct mail-order "university" that this had the "trappings" of an "occult cult crime" and such markers of difference (from the locals) as Damien's (natural) jet-black hair and his fondness for books, were enough to persuade the jury that this "weird" youth—whose name in the jurors' minds conjured up a third-rate horror movie rather than the Catholic saint for whom he had named himself—and his best friend were killers.¹⁵ Even prosecutor John Fogelman—who in his closing remarks pointed to Damien and warned the jury, "there's no soul in there"—was quoted as having said, "There was a remarkable lack of evidence

¹³ Jessie's erroneous and inconsistent confession is the closest thing to evidence against the other two as well. Judge David Burnett did not allow Pulitzer Prize-winning expert Dr. Richard Ofshe to testify before the jury that in his opinion Jessie's confession was obviously false and coerced, although Burnett did permit the jury to hear "cult expert" Dale Griffis testify.

¹⁴ The trials have been documented by directors Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky in their award-winning film, *Paradise Lost* (produced by Cabin Fever, 1996). The follow-up, *Paradise Lost Revisited: Revelation*, which focuses on the West Memphis Support Fund as well as new evidence in the case, was released early this year (Artisan Entertainment).

¹⁵ On the subject of satanism, local media were only too pleased to heighten the hysteria already triggered by national talk show hosts, including Donahue, Geraldo Rivera, Oprah Winfrey, and Sally Jesse Raphael, who had aired episodes reeking with allegations of Satanic Ritual Abuse—any evidence for which has yet to surface. Although he subsequently apologized for any harm he might have done, Geraldo alone did four shows on the subject, the last one of which featured the parents of Stevie Branch and included footage from an earlier sensationalistic program on the triple homicide.

against anyone.¹⁶ Eliminating evidence, however, and replacing the physical with the ideological as if with a demonic body double seems to have been the goal of the police from the start.

Physical evidence did surface long after the trial when Brent Turvey, a forensic scientist and criminal profiler, was asked by Misskelley's defense attorney to look at the autopsy photos and the evidence files from the case.¹⁷ The first thing he noticed were bitemarks.

There are two general but distinct types of bitemark patterns: (1) Those which are inflicted slowly, which leave a central ecchymotic area or "suck mark," and a radiating linear abrasion pattern surrounding the central area resembling a sunburst. The type is most often found in sexually oriented homicides; (2) Those which resemble a tooth-marked pattern. This is an attack or defensive bitemark and is seen most often in the battered-child type of homicide [Lowell Levine, in Turvey, 1999, pp. 385–386].

Both types of bitemarks were found on these victims, who were the targets of different kinds of rage. Turvey (1999) noted that "Steve Branch was bitten repeatedly about the face, with deep, tearing bites. . . . He suffered no stab wounds or cutting wounds. There is no sexual indication to the assault on his person, only punishment" (p. 382). By contrast, Chris Byers received "the greatest attention to his genitals, which were stabbed repeatedly and then ultimately removed. In addition, the bitemarks he appears to have suffered were of the 'suck mark' type, which is more sexually oriented" (pp. 382–383). The attack on the boy's genitals "points to an offender . . . perhaps confused and angered by his own sexual attraction to males," who was punishing Chris "for his own sexuality" and intent on establishing "sexual ownership of him" (p. 383).

What Turvey saw, based on the history of the victims and the "massive and punishment oriented" wounds they received, was

¹⁶ *Phoenix Times*. <http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/1996/111496/film1.html>.

¹⁷ Graphics artist Kathy Bakken, who had watched the film so that she could design the poster and was horrified at what she saw, approached Turvey about the case. For legal reasons, Bakken could not contact him herself.

a “battered child” crime.¹⁸ The deep lacerations on Chris Byers’s buttocks suggested that he had gotten more than the “one or two licks” his stepfather, John Mark Byers, claimed he gave him on the outside of his jeans the day he disappeared. “The wound patterns,” Turvey wrote in his profile,

inflicted on these victims are punishment oriented . . . inflicted with the intention to punish these children for a real or perceived transgression. . . . [T]he wounds are violent, traumatic, and the product of rage. But in addition to that, the type of injuries inflicted, (i.e., the bitemarks and the evident anger), pointedly indicate a custodial type homicide [p. 385].

All three were the victims of a “behavioral storm” (Walter, 1985, p. 219) unleashed, it has been hypothesized, when the little boys were discovered engaged in some kind of sexual activity with each other. Turvey noticed on Steve Branch’s penis abrasions, signs of chronic masturbation by himself or someone else, which to a medical examiner should have raised a “red flag” pointing to a “highly sexualized child. . . who is being sexually abused.”¹⁹

One bitemark, on Steve Branch’s forehead and eye socket, was sufficiently clear for “Dr. Thomas J. David, a Board certified forensic Odontologist . . . to determine that it indeed was a human bite mark. He then acquired dental casts from all three convicted defendants in the case,” compared them “with the unknown bitemark, and was able to exclude them as contributors” (p. 94).²⁰ At about the time when the bitemark evidence emerged, John Mark Byers coincidentally “lost” his teeth—a sudden loss common among suspects in cases where bitemark evidence exists. He has given several conflicting accounts of how this occurred: according to one, he lost them in a bar room brawl; in another, he lost them as a side effect of

¹⁸ Brent Turvey, as quoted in my notes taken at the Rule 37 hearing for Damien Echols, Jonesboro, Arkansas, October 27, 1998.

¹⁹ This also comes from my Rule 37 hearing notes.

²⁰ This evidence can not be used to free the boys in jail unless the case is reopened at some point during the appeal process now under way.

the medication Tegretol, which he claimed to be taking for a brain tumor, which, it has been established, he does not have.²¹

Why did the police not investigate the parents, particularly Byers, to begin with? In a review essay, Joyce Carol Oates (1999) described “[t]he notorious . . . murder of six-year-old child beauty pageant winner JonBenét Ramsey . . . as a case that Sherlock Holmes would have ‘solved’ in a few seconds’ ratiocination” (p. 32). Instead, the JonBenét case remained “stalled” and “perhaps sabotaged” by the investigators themselves, who were directed by John Eller, the Commander of the Boulder City police detective division to treat the Ramseys as “victims, not suspects.” Obediently, the lead detective, Linda Arndt, “bonded” with the Ramseys as “victims” (p. 34).

Oates feels that “[t]he subtext of the JonBenét Ramsey case is class and privilege in America.” She quotes Carlton Smith as saying, “there are two kinds of police procedures, . . . one for the rich and another for the poor” (p. 32). When it comes to child murder, however, a subtext operates that is not about money—none of the major figures in the West Memphis Case is wealthy—but about congruent fantasies that overlay and obscure each other: the law’s ideal of itself as the Big Father and the familial father’s fantasy of himself as the law. As Byers and Ridge so ominously agreed, the police and the pater familias mirror each other, “man to man.” This mirror refused to reflect these little boys and instead assaulted them, substituting for their obscured image that of three marginal teenagers, neither boys nor men, as if to merge the victims with their assailants. John Mark Byers claimed to have heard over police radio (man to man), that devil worshipper Damien Echols had hidden under his bed a jar containing Chris Byers’s testicles; by saying this, Byers himself started this rumor, which continues to spread. It is as if the Kronos of Graeco-Freudian myth is competing with the Satan beloved by American Christians to see which has the bigger mouth, the more apocalyptic *jouissance*.

²¹ There is more: Byers has been banned from several counties owing to burglary charges against him and was arrested for compelling a couple of minors at gunpoint to fight each other with knives and “settle” their differences “like men.” Most recently, Byers was arrested and convicted of trying to sell drugs to a police officer.

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