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## How sharper than a serpent's tooth

**Lear:**

If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!  
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,  
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,  
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits  
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel  
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!

[King Lear Act 1, scene 4, 281–289](#)

King Lear has cut a deal with the two more flattering of his three daughters: he will turn power over to them as long as he can keep the name and respect due to a king, and so long as they alternately host him and his train of a hundred knights. Once they've got the power, of course, Regan and Goneril renege on their part of the bargain. When Goneril, as prelude to disbanding Lear's miniature army, objects to the group's rowdiness, the king is furious. Her ingratitude is to Lear "sharper than a serpent's tooth." He demands that Nature render Goneril infertile, or, if his daughter must "teem" (give birth, like an animal), that her child be a "thwart disnatur'd (unnatural and perverse) torment to her, as she is to him. He vividly imagines a monstrous infant stamping wrinkles in Goneril's brow, and burning her cheeks with its "cadent" (falling) tears.

Later, Lear complains to Regan—who will turn out to be, if anything, worse than Goneril—of Goneril's "Sharp-tooth'd unkindness" and her "serpent-like" tongue (Act 2, scene 4). His snakelike daughters represent the bestiality of all women: "Down from the waist they are Centaurs. . . Beneath is all the fiends" (Act 4, scene 6). As he plunges from indignation into madness, Lear becomes more and more horrified at the act of generation, and of his spawning such monstrous children; but he deflects self-criticism into vilification of women.

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