Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

_The End of Kinship: "Measure for Measure," Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood._

by Marc Shell

Bruce Thomas Boehrer


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0361-0160%28198824%2919%3A4%3C721%3ATEOK%22F%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M

_Sixteenth Century Journal_ is currently published by The Sixteenth Century Journal.

Although it has prompted a recent book and some noteworthy articles by various critics, the subject of incest in early modern English literature remains a virtually open one. Shell's work contributes to scholarship on this subject in important and admirable ways, both through the breadth of its research base and the novelty of its thesis.

Focusing upon Shakespeare, and yet generally avoiding the more obvious instances of unmediated incest in *Hamlet* and *Pericles*, Shell proposes an adventuresome—even audacious—reading of *Measure for Measure* as centrally concerned with the threat incest poses to social organization. From Shell's perspective, the play dramatizes a problem intrinsic to government: that of regulating sexual exchange. Shakespeare’s Vienna, consumed by promiscuity, prostitution, and bastardy, threatens to disturb social structure by destabilizing the basis of personal identity itself—parenthood; and yet the novice Sister Isabella (and the false Brother Vincentio), by foregoing the demands of reproduction in favor of clerical celibacy, pose an equally grave threat to society—the threat that generation may entirely cease. For Shell, *Measure for Measure* seeks to mediate between these two threats (both of which, in different ways, constitute the end of kinship); and it does so through the final vehicle of Vincentio’s proposed marriage to Isabella; a marriage that combines spiritual incest (a kind of holy Sister marrying a kind of holy Brother) with secular incest (Shell argues, a bit tenuously, that Vincentio and Isabella are de facto relatives), sanctifying both within the structures of matrimony.

Shell’s argument is subtle and far-reaching, and it gains its very real power from its most obvious apparent defect: the fact that *Measure for Measure* has never before been seriously considered as a drama about incest. Indeed, in strict New Critical terms, one might object that there is virtually no solid textual support for Shell’s thesis (the word “incest” only occurs once in the play, for instance, and then only in a self-consciously figurative usage); and yet Shell successfully identifies kinship and exchange as concepts essential to the play’s situation within culture. In the process, he develops a lengthy and illuminating discussion of how kinship distinctions reinscribe themselves within Christian theology and church hierarchy; and thus one of this book’s really original contributions to scholarship (not only in literary criticism, but in the social sciences as well) is to begin a systematic analysis of Christianity’s tribal substrate—that is, to view Christianity as itself a mode of social organization grappling with the very tensions that, according to Shell, dominate *Measure for Measure*.

In pursuing such a bold course, Shell risks various criticisms, at least one of which may be appropriate. For even as he develops his powerful critique of the role of kinship within Renaissance religious thought, it becomes clear that in some ways this book isn’t really about *Measure for Measure* at all—that Shakespeare’s play simply provides Shell with an excuse to do what he does best: wide-ranging and cogent cultural analysis. (Indeed, one sometimes feels—quite rightly, given Shell's general procedure—that if *Measure for Measure* is about incest, then surely so is everything else that Shakespeare ever wrote.) It may be worth noting that Shell’s work on the
Christian tradition has been prepared for in part by Jack Goody's *Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*—an important book that doesn't appear in Shell's otherwise outstanding bibliography. Yet these are minor problems, the kind one is well willing to endure for the sake of Shell's originality and insight. *The End of Kinship* is in many ways groundbreaking work, and it should be valuable both to Shakespearians and to students of Renaissance cultural history in general.

Bruce Thomas Boehrer
Florida State University


Although A.L. Rowse is one of the most prolific and popular writers on the Tudor period, this reviewer found *Court & Country* disappointing. He was displeased at the outset by the author's flagrant disregard for the rules of English grammar, of which one of his distinction could not be ignorant. In several of these essays there is no consistency in the use of verb tenses. For example, “the ship *Spark* went in upon the sands at Margate and *is* lost” (32). “Bridgewater *was not yet dead*, convenient as that would *be*” (39). “Hussey *advised* Lisle not to trouble Cromwell. . . .Catherine Bosset *remains* with the Rutlands” (40).

Rowse uses passive voice excessively, and at points he seems to have invented words to serve his purpose. What, for instance, does he mean in stating, “a Courtenay married the daughter of Louis VI. . . ; one or two more royal marriages *grandified* and, in the end, endangered the family”? (61) Does not this author know the subjunctive mood of the verb *to be* in the third person, past tense is not “if she *was* to produce an heir,” but “if she *were* to produce an heir”? (73) What are “English carpets of Turkey making”? (72) How could a baptismal font be *barbaric*? (104) One could cite many more examples of this carelessness, but to do so would make reading this review as tedious an experience as reading *Court & Country*.

In addition to the awkward style of these essays, Rowse has created further difficulty for readers by assuming that they are well informed about the political history of the Tudor era. Without such knowledge the eight biographical sketches which comprise this book would be practically unintelligible. The portraits of Richard Topcliffe and Sir Richard Hawkins are fairly lucid, but the others are obtuse and confusing. Rowse’s concept of social history appears to include the listing of trivia that could have had no decisive influence upon events. What, for example, is the significance of the report that Lady Lisle asked for a matins book, or Catherine received twelve yards of damask? Some of these *vignettes* seem to abound with such useless information, which led this reviewer to write in the margins *Who cares?*

The eight subjects of this book were all important figures who deserve study within the context of Tudor social history. Aside from Topcliffe and Hawkins, however, the others—Lady Lisle, Edward Courtenay (Earl of Devon), Sir Peter Carew, William Carnsew, Henry Cuffe, and Richard Carew, have not received justice from the pen of A.L. Rowse.

Only libraries with special collections in Tudor history and literature need purchase this poorly written and carelessly edited volume. It is a credit to neither author nor publisher.

James McGoldrick
Cedarville College