

Reviewed Work(s):

*The End of Kinship: "Measure for Measure," Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood.*  
by Marc Shell

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*Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4. (Winter, 1988), pp. 721-722.

**The End of Kinship: “Measure for Measure,” Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood.** Marc Shell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. 199 pp. \$32.50.

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.

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