

The End of Kinship

*'Measure for Measure,'
Incest, and the
Ideal of Universal Siblinghood*

Marc Shell

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For Stanley Cavell

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M.S.

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Preface

They passed no further, neyther could they discover the land's end (which some holde to be there).

Acosta's Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies, 3.11.156.

THAT AN ACT we relegate to the perverse periphery or to the holy center of human life is essentially what we all practice—this would be an outlandish thesis. It would suggest that an apparently alien act—one that we claim to despise at the outermost limit of the sphere of life, or to revere at the innermost limit, or to both despise and revere as “taboo”—is really a familiar act. It would suggest that the line or point marking the bounds of the conventions and laws we hold dear actually defines those conventions and laws not only by opposition to, or difference from, them but also by its essential sameness to them.

The taboo on incest—the fact that we regard it as both perverse and holy—is interesting in its own right, but it is not my principal concern in *The End of Kinship*. Instead I will focus on the ordinary sphere of social life, defined by opposition to the center or periphery where incest is accepted or expected. We ordinarily suppose ourselves to live free of incest by virtue of a kinship structure that allows us to distinguish—to believe that we can distinguish or that it makes sense to distinguish—between non-kin (those persons with whom we can have sexual intercourse without violating the incest taboo) and kin (those with whom we cannot). We might call this distinction one end, or generic intention, of kinship. Could it be, however, that the distinction between nonkin and kin—or between chastity and incest—might be called reasonably into question?

The End of Kinship is, in part, an exploration of one way to make sense of this question. It is an exploration of the doctrine of Universal Siblinghood, an idea that has informed the thought and life of the West for millennia. We shall see that the doctrine of Universal Siblinghood, which is usually dismissed as being merely figural or linguistically perverse, collapses the defining elements of society—the perverse periphery and the holy center—into the sphere of ordinary social life in such a way that incest is understood to pervade all human intention and action. The teleological and ideological completion, or end, of the distinctions that kinship establishes is thus its own undoing. The end of kinship is the ending of kinship.

A thesis that takes its ground from the outermost and innermost

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borders of the place where we live is inevitably outlaw and discomfiting. We shall be tempted therefore to dismiss its claims, even to the point of calling them overly figural or excessively literal. Putting in question the law of the land involves trying to stand for a while at land's end, and talking about apparently extraterrestrial matters can involve putting into play terms that are, at first blush, inadequate or unpleasantly archaic. "Universal Siblinghood" is such a term, for it implies "a kind of incest" that makes for the ending of kinship. "Talion," which indicates a return of like for like, is another. It implies an exchange of the kind that informs not only revenge (or retaliation) but also those commercial and sexual substitutions where one thing or person passes for another, as happens in incest. Just such a notion of reciprocity in likeness and likelihood—of talion in Universal Siblinghood—Shakespeare had in mind when he named the play that we shall discuss *Measure for Measure*: "Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure."

The chapters in this book compose a commentary that expresses the ideas of its author in the interpretation of another work. Commentary elucidates a text and thereby elucidates a thesis of its own about the human problems by which the text is informed. It is an ancient medium of expression, and in certain circumstances it is the best one, but sometimes it is difficult to read. Special problems of exposition make repetition inevitable, and roadside stops are often few and far between. More importantly, a commentary assumes from the first what is only later shown to be or not to be the case: namely, that the text under discussion is—or will be made to be—as meaningful in its own way as people used to believe were the Holy Books (the commentaries on the Bible are legion) or philosophical works (a good commentary on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* still counts as an individual work in its own right). To classify *Measure for Measure* with such writings may seem presumptuous to believers or philosophers; however, I have chosen to discuss *Measure for Measure* not only because I believe it is a "great" work in its own right but because it has a pivotal place in the Western tradition. Wonder about whether and how a single dramatic work can, or can be made to, play out a crux of our tradition—a healthy skepticism one should welcome from any quarter—is the soundest place from which studious interpretation can take its bearings.

Why not speak about incest and talion without the intermediation of speaking about or through *Measure for Measure*, or of speaking through a dummy? I might well have used another voice. And the voices of economist, anthropologist, psychologist, and political theo-

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rist, as well as of me, will sound here from time to time, sometimes for many pages. Yet it is one thesis of this book that literary commentary can offer unique access to the problems incest poses. By concerning itself with the figurative aspect of language and with literary works that are at once fictional and typical, it can provide a unique way to understand central issues. The particular literary work—*Measure for Measure*—discussed in the central chapters of this book brings to light a series of fundamental problems involving the classification of kin and kind, the tension between natural teleology and political teleology, and the opposition between celibacy and liberty. With its help we shall reexamine the nature of sexual and commercial exchange in human society and focus on what has been called, with what reason we shall henceforward put into question, one overall characteristic of human beings in society.