

The Virtue of Incest

Review of Marc Shell, Elizabeth's Glass

The Romance of Apollonius of Tyre opens with the classic fairy-tale couple: the king and his daughter. Antiochus is powerful, she is beautiful, and of marriageable age – there is no mother. The difference is that, in this variation, she will not leave home to marry a prince, for her father Antiochus ‘began to love her in a way unsuitable for a father . . . Since he could not endure the wound in his breast, one day . . . he rushed into his daughter’s room and ordered the servants to withdraw . . . Spurred on by the frenzy of his lust, he took his daughter’s virginity by force, in spite of her lengthy resistance.’

After the rape, the girl (who remains nameless) wants to kill herself, but her nurse (in romance and fairy tale, nurses almost always advance the immoralist argument for survival) persuades her to live and tolerate her father’s passion. The King announces that he will give his daughter to the suitor who can answer a riddle – and candidates who fail will die. Enter Apollonius, who guesses correctly that Antiochus is living incestuously with his daughter: ‘Nor did you lie,’ he tells the King, ‘when you said, “I eat my mother’s flesh”: look at your daughter.’ Apollonius’

discovery places him in great danger, and he flees – his adventures will disclose the proper pattern of paternal and filial love, as he first loses, then regains both true wife and true daughter. His multiple quest will involve him in redefining himself and others, in recognising concealed identities and in solving riddles, before the happy ending and the reconciliation are achieved.

The romance was one of the best known and most loved in the medieval world, and exists in numerous manuscripts and versions from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards. Shakespeare follows its plot in *Pericles*, and it intertwines with many fairy tales: for example, Giambattista Basile's 'The She-Bear' (1636) and 'Donkeyskin', written down by Charles Perrault in 1694, though in both these stories the daughter escapes from her father by disguising herself in an animal skin.

Incest has now become one of the dominant focuses of moral panic, flourishing virulently in fantasy as well as occurring, often tragically, in practice, while these old stories, which deal with it, and which offer the consolation of an image reflected back, of a wrong unmasked, of authority shaken and realigned, lie overlooked on the river-bed of contemporary consciousness, as a turbulent current of terror, suspicions and despair rushes by. Through its own form of riddling, a romance like that of Apollonius encrypted emotional and social realities which helped its receivers at least to understand their situation a bit better.

In this remarkable study, Marc Shell has widened the range of genres dealing with the personal cost of the dysfunctional family to include a startling and unlikely candidate: a translation of a mystical meditation into English from French made by Princess Elizabeth, the future Queen. *The Glass of the Sinful Soul*, as she called it, was not an original work, but a good pupil's exercise, undertaken in 1544 at the age of eleven as part of her lessons. A long prayer by Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre, it was written out and enclosed between embroidered covers, as a New Year's present for Catherine Parr, Elizabeth's fourth stepmother, and her last. This text has never been edited or analysed before, in spite of its fascination as a holograph manuscript by the future Gloriana, Astraea, Una, the Faerie Queene. Marc Shell expresses surprise at this, as well he might, for as he points out, the manuscript conjoins three of the most brilliant lively-minded queens of the era: Marguerite de Navarre was the compiler of *The Heptameron*, a collection of secular tales, as well as a Reformist sympathiser, friend of Calvin and patron of independent scholars; Catherine Parr also composed religious meditations, including

the *Lamentacion of a Synner*. She was 'the first woman to publish in English', Shell says, 'with the intention of influencing the public'. All three once and future queens were united by their active interest in Protestantism: Marguerite gave protection to the Huguenots in France, and her own work was denounced as heretical by the Sorbonne.

Over Elizabeth and Catherine fell the shadow of another woman of gifts and intelligence, who was a queen herself for a spell: Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother. In an age when Thomas More showed his radical mettle by according his daughters the same education as his sons, Anne had been allowed to cultivate her mind to an unusual degree; she had also corresponded with Marguerite, with whom she shared an interest in Reform theology and piety. The French Queen probably sent the English Queen *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse*. So when Anne's brilliant daughter Elizabeth began Englishing it and copying out her translation in her shapely, confident italic hand, she was also remembering the mother who had had her head cut off when she was three; the book is a kind of concealed memorial to Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth, who could probably not remember her, still wanted to picture her lost mother in her glass, like Miranda in *The Tempest*. *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* is her veiled girlhood tribute.

It does not make for easy reading now, unless the reader has a special taste for a brand of women's mysticism that began earlier, in Germany and the Lowlands, with the *devotio moderna*. Cries and ejaculations fly thick and fast, the soul seems to labour unavailingly, and sinks into a mire of bloated, yearning commonplaces. Marc Shell, however, has been able to read the braille of another tale beneath the rhetorical surplus, and to discover there the brightness of an individual imagination communicating strongly within given restrictions. His guidance is indispensable. Even Lacan was alert to the female mystics' intellectual adventurousness, though he did not expand on the way they seize on symbolic language for their own purposes. Peter Dronke has shown with great warmth and sensitivity how visionaries like Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, and Marguerite Porete at the beginning of the fourteenth, developed an original, feminist subjectivity in their ecstatic writings. Marguerite de Navarre's intense personal ardour reveals the influence of Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. This was a piety which dispensed with intermediaries: Porete's 'free soul' anticipated the Reformers' emphasis on individual conscience and their rage at Catholic priestly authority. For bypassing the clergy and speaking directly to God,

Marguerite Porete was burned in the Place de Grève in Paris in 1310 – perhaps the first female literary martyr.

The text the Princess Elizabeth translated, this long outpouring of divine prayers and praise, by turns rapturous and desperate, expansive and pent-up, chaste and erotic, thus affirmed a Protestant view of the relation of the individual and God, and looks forward, Shell argues, to the identification, in Protestant, Elizabethan Britain, of the monarch (anointed but not ordained) with the head of the Church, and to the convergence of patriotism and the Reformed faith in the soul of an Englishman/woman.

The political significance of the work as it circulated among royal women did not remain a private matter. In 1548, four years after the princess finished the translation, it was published by the Reformer John Bale, one of Elizabeth's mentors, under the purposively improved title, *A Godly Meditation of the Christian Soul*. Bale had his reasons, as Shell shows, and he encoded them (nothing was then written entirely *en clair*, it seems) in the learned Epistle Dedicatory and the shorter Conclusion which framed the work. He was the suitor who would grasp the contents of her riddle, claim her, and proclaim her true relation to the world.

John Bale's rhetoric has not attracted an editor's attention before, and in many ways he's an even more brilliant *trouvaille* than Elizabeth's *Glass* itself. A kind of Casaubon *avant la lettre*, polymathic, earnest, deploying references and invoking names in fistfuls, he also rants with splendid vigour: 'The monks in public schools . . . have advanced their idle monkery above the office of a bishop, and the friars with their scald craving beggary above the degrees of them both, as is largely seen in the brawling works of Richard Maydeston.' He thus contributes to the oratory of Protestant dissent which Ted Hughes and Tom Paulin have both evoked as a lost – or at least neglected – strand of the national tradition.

Bale blazoned his desiderata as much as he reviled the objects of his contempt. The Princess Elizabeth embodied all he hoped for. In his Conclusion, she represents the sum of a British tradition of queens, great ladies, brilliant female minds. His is a gripping, legendary, crazily partial account of the national history: 'Though none in this land have yet done as did among the Greeks Plutarch and among the Latins Boccaccio . . . that is to say, left behind them catalogues or nomenclatures of famous and honorable women, yet hath it not at any time been barren of them. No, not in the days of most popish darkness as appeareth by Eleanor Cobham,

the wife of good Duke Humphrey.' For sheer entertainment, Bale far surpasses the religious turmoil of Marguerite/Elizabeth. In Bale, erudition becomes rapture, gynephilia euphoria.

Bale was a priest who married a nun, more, Shell thinks, to prove his Protestant credentials than to express his affections. The marriage of Luther to the Cistercian Catherine von Bora had been denounced as incest, because all monks and nuns were brothers and sisters in Christ. Incest therefore occupied a special place in the new faith: it was a badge of virtue, or at any rate, its value had to be recast in order to free it from its ancient taint. On Elizabeth's accession, Bale returned to England from Germany, where he had had *The Glass* published, but he died soon after, doubtless poised for influence, but robbed of the rewards of his enterprising fidelity – Shell does not expand.

The Glass was thus used, in conditions of acute political turbulence, to support the arguments for a queen in general, for Elizabeth in particular, and for a female defender of the Protestant faith, both before and after the fact, as three further editions between 1568 and 1582 suggest. But *The Glass* does not belong only in this frame of realpolitik. Shell pushes deep into what it suggests as to the nexus of psychic relations in the young Princess's life, and how they are enmeshed with questions of the legitimacy of her rule.

This motherless child, who, by 1544, had already seen so many 'mothers' come and go (Jane Seymour in childbirth seven years earlier, Catherine Howard beheaded five years after that), and who would see – and bring about – more women's deaths in her time, had also been made fatherless, when by Act of Parliament in 1536 Henry VIII proclaimed her a bastard. Like a figure in a riddle, Elizabeth's identity was wrapped in enigma, her status unstable, her name challenged: who was she, to what was she heir, to what was she entitled? The extraordinary act of decipherment which Shell performs reveals that Elizabeth speaks of herself and her predicament in the accents of the sinful soul whose implorings and rapture replicate her own quandary.

The soul addresses God in the allegorical language of the Song of Songs: the beloved is at once sister and spouse, little child and *magna mater*, wife and faithless adulteress. Like the Virgin Mary, she is both mother to the godhead, his daughter from the beginning, and his betrothed. Shell audaciously takes the mystical collapse of distinctions between lover, mother, bride and daughter, matches it with the situation in the Tudor court, and uses this religious vision as a template for the

remodelled relation between monarch and subjects, reconstituting it as a passionate, aberrant, elective, spiritually incestuous family.

In this light, *The Glass* becomes 'a kinship riddle' in which the true princess was wrapped around by powers contending for control of the throne's significance. When Elizabeth expressed the symbolic incest of the soul, the child of God, with her father, the Creator and King of all, and then claimed equality with that 'sinful soul' as his spouse, she was laying the foundation of the modern state, in which the ruler, secular and religious (monarch and Pope), would be both brother and sister, mother and father, bride and bridegroom of the family of his/her subjects: she was casting herself, Shell writes, as a 'Mother Superior in a national siblinehood'. The origins of the Virgin Queen, hierogamously joined to her country, lie here. As she said in her accession speech: 'I have long since made choice of a husband, the kingdom of England . . . I beseech you, gentlemen, charge me not with the want of children, forasmuch as every one of you, and every Englishman besides, are my children and relations.'

The spectre of incest held the Tudor court in a permanent state of alarm, as surely as the Sphinx, that omen of aberration, had terrorised Thebes: Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon because she had been married to his brother, he charged Anne Boleyn with committing incest with her brother George, and he himself had slept with her sister, Mary. Even more sharply, Thomas Seymour, Elizabeth's former step-uncle (as brother to Jane) as well as stepfather (he married the widowed Catherine Parr after Henry VIII's death), molested and later tried to marry her. Incest was widely defined in those days: according to Catholic laws of affinity, marriage between the godparents of the same child was forbidden, as was any union of children who shared a godparent. The notion of 'carnal contagion', a kind of theological Aids, decreed that anyone who slept with someone was joined to them, so that a third party might be committing incest too: 'when a man hath meddled with a woman, or a woman with a man, neither may be wedded to [the] other's kin, into the fifth degree . . . for if they do, it is incest'. The most extreme view condemned all sex as incestuous, because all are one in the family of Adam.

As a free-thinking Protestant, Bale was arguing against this mechanistic view of morality when he issued his impassioned justification of Anne Boleyn's daughter: 'true nobility' springs, he writes in the *Epistle Dedicatory*, from 'a famous renown obtained by long exercised virtue'. That Elizabeth was acutely aware that she was not only illegitimate, but

possibly tainted by the incestuous union of her mother, was reflected in the translation exercises she chose to do as part of her education in virtue. From Beethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, she rendered the lines:

If your first spring and author
God you view,
No man bastard be . . .

The Catholic order, based on an outworn formulaic arrangement of kin, was to be replaced by the 'extraordinary kinship' of the Christian community. No one would be a bastard any more, if true to God, king (queen) and country. Everyone, like Luther, like John Bale himself, would be brother and sister, bride and groom. Spiritual incest was to lead to the first stirrings of democratic levelling between ruler and ruled in a new polity.

Does Shell overinterpret the evidence, as happens increasingly often with the more brilliant decoders working in America and influenced by French methods of inquiry? His essay is so fresh and so compelling that it seems grudging to offer objections. There are, however, several rucks in his ingeniously woven carpet: Elizabeth's sibling relation to her Faerie Kingdom and its folk needs development before it can become truly convincing, as her cult and her virginity elevated her far above the levelling voice of the 'sinful soul'. Did the model of the monarch as divine autocrat really change at this point, as Shell argues? Did its decline even begin here? Again, the taboo on incest survives, uninfluenced by Protestant revision, in Shakespeare's treatment of the Apollonius story in *Pericles* (1608) and in later variations. Indeed, in *Much Ado*, Beatrice quips that she may not marry: 'As Adam's sons are my brethren and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred.' It's one of her jokes, but it shows that old ideas about consanguinity and the incest taboo were still spooking believers. Moreover, Shakespeare had certainly not taken in his Queen's revolutionary ideas about bastardy.

There is a third, more fundamental objection to be made, however. The idea that mythic structures interact with social and political structures as in a mirror – but without inversion – runs contrary to much thinking about the sacred, its function and its means of expression. The mythic can only be conveyed through language which turns common laws, distinctions and relations upside down and inside out: hence celibate priests and cross-dressed shamans, virgin births, androgynous

gods, and the 'Virgin mother, daughter to thy son' whom Dante invoked. By offering an image of difference, the sacred helps to set the rules, to define the norm. Shell argues that Bale and Elizabeth's joint work converts the transgressive, even tragic reality of incest into a utopian philosophy – that it brings the vision of the sacred family down to earth. The inversion makes the divine exception human. Perhaps the paradoxical cancellation of the incest taboo represents another of Protestantism's revolutionary freedoms; the new polity transgressed against the old order's distinction between sacred and profane, incorporating the mythic into the material order and the arrangement of power – as can be seen in Shakespeare's treatment of kingship. Shell's material could, however, be read exactly the other way round: to argue that Elizabeth was hallowed by the double anomaly of her unchaste kinship and her own chaste state: that they remained exceptional, and that therein lay the strong magic of the Virgin Queen.

This is a book of outstanding interest and subtlety, produced with model notes and glossary; it may overreach the evidence in boldness, but it unfailingly asks – and answers – acute questions, about the nation's identity, the permeable boundary between sex and politics, and the fascination of incest.