

## Book Reviews

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Catherine Belsey. *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999. Pp xvii, 203.

Catherine Belsey's fine book, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, takes aim at 'family values' both today and in Shakespeare's England. Belsey claims that the 'family values' debated today (in England) emerged in the sixteenth-century; however, she argues, those values were not celebrated in their emergence. Instead, what she sees as the new sixteenth-century focus on marriage and family led many people, Shakespeare among them, to question whether 'family values' might bring happiness. If, today, those values are promoted by the cultural right, in Shakespeare's England they were seen, correctly in Belsey's view, as precarious, dangerous, and perhaps misplaced. Belsey aims to 'historicize and thus denaturalize family values' (xiv). There is, she argues, 'a problem at the heart of family values themselves' (xiv). While many people in today's England see 'family values' as the solution for social ills, in the sixteenth century, those values created the ills they are now designed to solve.

In the course of her compelling argument, Belsey reads many material texts apart from and along with some of Shakespeare's plays. Belsey looks at images of Adam and Eve and the Fall depicted on bedheads, marriage chests, bed valences, and dishes. Engravings, paintings, and grave monuments help her to support her overall argument about the early modern 'ambivalence' regarding marriage and family (54). The book's final chapter on *Hamlet* discusses embroidered pillow covers and other visual images of Cain and Abel. Her detailed readings of these various material objects offer the reader a visual sense of the changing cultural history her book describes. She calls her project 'a history of representation' (5), and the variety of representations in question adds power to her argument about emergent 'family values' and the questions that surrounded those emergent values. Belsey claims that '[r]epresentational priorities change as values change, and history at the level of the signifier records these shifts of value' (6). Her book is lavishly illustrated with those signifiers, offering her readers the chance to see the history of values as people lived with them over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The book's introduction is a theoretical discussion of its own parameters. A bit disconcertingly, Belsey begins by describing a living history museum in

Wales. Belsey uses that description to talk about the impossibility of recreating the past as it was lived. She acknowledges that some social historians have written cross-disciplinary work that challenges traditional distinctions between two kinds of history: history that claims to be about and only about how people 'really' lived and cultural history (what I would call cultural studies) that claims to reach for 'what people wanted to do, wished they had done, ... cared about and deplored' (6). However, she is concerned in her introduction to distinguish her book and her practice of cultural history from historiography, recent attempts at creating living history, and what she calls 'anthropology in its classic mode' (9). Finally, Belsey is at pains to define her practice as different from new historicism. She claims that while new historicism looks at texts as 'transparent' signifiers of their cultural moments, moments that are depicted as relatively unified, she will look at texts for their revelations of cultural change, inconsistency, and instability of meanings.

Throughout the introduction and the rest of the book, Belsey draws her critical vocabulary primarily from Derrida and Lacan; Lacan, in particular, provides her with a way to speak about the gaps and instabilities that she wants to discuss. Perhaps Belsey is so concerned to theorize her own project and acknowledge repeatedly that we cannot really reach the past because she wants to justify her use of these theorists. After all, if what we can ultimately see is only our motivated picture of the past, as complex and carefully drawn as that picture might be, then it seems perfectly justifiable to reach that picture using theorists who largely reject historical difference (although Derrida has recently made forays into past worlds). Lacan, as Belsey suggests, offers 'an account of the human condition' (25). Despite all of her efforts at justification, however, Belsey's use of Lacan is, for this reader, the book's only crucial weakness. Belsey's own formulation signals the problem. For if Belsey wants to describe cultural change – real and crucial changes in how people relate to themselves, what they want, wish, care about, and 'deplore' – than how can there be a 'human condition' as such? The Lacanian 'human condition' implies an unchanging human psyche, and it is hard to know what that psyche could consist of if not people's desires.

*Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* is divided into the introduction (denoted chapter 1), four other chapters, and a postscript. The chapters each treat one stage in the construction of what is now naturalized as 'the family'. Chapter 2 contends with desire in the Edenic state. The next chapter examines sixteenth century images of marriage. 'Parenthood' is the subject of chapter 4, and sibling

rivalry the subject of chapter 5. Each chapter takes at least one Shakespeare play as its ostensible focal text.

*Love's Labour's Lost, As You Like It*, poetic accounts of Genesis, and protestant marriage manuals are the texts treated in chapter 2. Belsey sees the plays as centering on the joys and tribulations of Edenic desire. Like protestant marriage manuals, these plays point toward marriage as solving the problem of human desire. However, Belsey claims, all of these texts recognize the pitfall that is passion. The plays, especially, see marriage as a solution but also as 'discipline'. In this chapter, Belsey uses Lacan to talk about the masks and games people use in the dance of courtship (50-51). When Belsey discusses Guillaume de Saluste du Bartas's *Divine Weeks and Works ...*, a text that rewrites the Genesis story, she acknowledges, rightly, that this text and others like it do not idealize the wife as the solution to man's worldly predicament. According to Lacan, however, human courtship is always the same, conducted within the parameters of human masking and display. Lacan works well for Belsey as a lens through which to read the masking and display so prevalent in *Love's Labour's Lost*. However, his theory does nothing to explain how the vision of marriage as a 'discipline' and a mine-field has been ideologically transformed over the centuries into a vision of idealized 'family values'.

Briefly discussing *Cymbeline*, but focusing on *The Winter's Tale* and other material objects, chapter 3 contends that Shakespeare's plays are 'less optimistic' than theological writings 'about the stability' of marriage 'in a fallen world, repeatedly linking conjugal desire with danger and sorrow' (60). This point has already been made quite eloquently by Stephen Orgel in his 1996 book *Impersonations*. What Belsey adds to this analysis are her wonderful readings of marriage chests, bedheads, bed valences, and betrothal dishes. She contextualizes her point, as well, with readings of protestant marriage manuals, St. Augustine's Catholic theology, a Montaigne essay, comments by Izaak Walton and Francis Bacon, and a relatively extended reading of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The *Anatomy* is particularly useful for Belsey as it encapsulates 'the contradictory values in circulation' in the 1620s and 30s. Belsey argues that the protestant move to integrate love and marriage was fraught. The story of Edenic love is a story of destruction as well as of idyllic wholeness, and the agent of that destruction is the woman, Eve. No author in the period could forget that the woman who made up Adam's felt lack brought sin into the world. Thus there is a 'defining paradox in the ideal [of loving marriage] itself' (82).

Chapter 4, 'Parenthood: Hermione's Statue' is perhaps this book's most compelling. In it, Belsey reads *The Winter's Tale* in detail and also spends a lot of time looking at tomb images of families. She traces a change in the way families are portrayed on tombs, a slow and uneven movement from tomb sculpture that represents dynastic marriages to tomb sculpture that represents affective families. Her reading of the play places its representation of the family in the conflict between these two modes. Belsey argues that the affectionate image of marriage we see on some of the later tombs is visibly dangerous in the play, causing the death of Mamillius at the hands of his father: 'the play locates death at the heart of the intimate relationship between the loving couple' (102). She meditates on the possible multiple meanings of the word 'affection', as Leontes uses it in his speech to Mamillius about his mother. She suggests that while the Victorians tried to separate jealousy from marital love as they interpreted this word,

conceivably Shakespeare's audience was less sentimental about family values than we are, perhaps because before the institution was fully sanctified, it was possible to acknowledge the violence that so commonly occurs behind respectable closed doors. Perhaps too, in a world where privacy was less readily available, the violence was correspondingly more visible, as it is in the court of Leontes. (107)

Another detailed reading, this time of Perdita's language of flowers, leads Belsey to contend that in Perdita's pastoral speeches also we can see the potential 'pathology' associated with desire in the period. Following Bruce Smith's suggestion, Belsey argues that Hermione's statue is a tomb statue; at the end of the play, Hermione rises from the dead, making family values 'a miracle, a resurrection, an impossibility' (120). Although one might quarrel with the details of these readings, they are provocative.

In chapter 5, Belsey uses that most-discussed of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet*, to talk about the place of sibling rivalry within early modern family values. Perhaps inevitably, given *Hamlet's* history, the chapter becomes as much a disquisition on the play, and Belsey's reading of the play, as it does a culminating argument for the book. The other texts for the chapter include pictorial representations of the Dance of the Dead, a dance that Belsey suggests is eroticized and perversely celebratory. In her reading 'Hamlet becomes Death's reluctant living partner in a Dance initially brought into existence for all human beings within the first marriage, and inaugurated by the first instance of sibling rivalry leading to murder' (165-66). On the way to concluding that

the family, founded in death, becomes a site of passionate murder, Belsey invokes Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida's *The Post Card*, and Lacan's 'account of aggressivity' (137). These theorists become ways of explaining the play's enigmatic character and its appeal. I am not sure they do much to explain the early modern ambivalence about family values.

In both of the book's final chapters, Belsey criticizes Victorian and Romantic critics for their moralizing and romantic readings of Shakespeare's plays. In chapter 5, she asserts that she has 'no wish to add to the list of tributes to Shakespeare's insight into universal human nature' (167). The paradox within Belsey's own critical practice in this book involves this passionate desire to challenge such readings with theory that invokes another 'universal human nature', the Freudian and Lacanian human nature 'discovered' in Victorian England. The problem with touting family values, according to Belsey, is that such an unambivalent celebration fails to take into account desire, the thing that 'in the twentieth century, Jacques Lacan calls, "the dark god in the sheep's clothing of the Good Shepherd, Eros"' (82). The wonderful evidence and readings in this book suggest that people in the sixteenth century might never have met 'the Good Shepherd, Eros', that they may have been struggling with souls and lust rather than with psyches and desire. Perhaps the 'Good Shepherd, Eros' is as much a child of the Romantics as the Dance of Death was a child of medieval England. Belsey's book is challenging, intelligent, and beautiful. While it only addresses a small piece of the Shakespearean canon, Shakespeareans and readers interested in the family and in the sixteenth and seventeenth century would be well advised to take a look.

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W.R. Elton and John M. Mucciolo (eds). *The Shakespearean International Yearbook 1: Where Are We Now in Shakespearean Studies?* Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999. Pp xv, 381.

In one way or another the articles in this yearbook address the question posed by its subtitle, 'Where are we now in Shakespearean studies?' As one might expect, the answers range from 'in a state of flux certainly, and perhaps on the cusp of exciting change' (Ros King, on staging at the new Globe, 138) to 'in a state of transition' (Norman Blake, on the study of Shakespeare's language, 182) and 'all over the place' (Graham Bradshaw, on the study of Shakespearean tragedy, 3). 'All over the place' describes the volume itself. In particular, 'now'