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Teaching the Late Plays as Family Romance

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To teach the late plays as what Freud called the 'family romance' may, I believe, get us as close to the continually decentered centers of these plays as we and our students can. Indeed, I confess that when reading and teaching them, I find myself, openly or shamefacedly, recuperated by a humanistic valorization of the text which I sometimes thought to have expunged from my critical practices. While that is a separate issue of theory (and teaching), it is not irrelevant to the ways these plays may help us understand the "tempest. . . birth, and death" (Per 5.3.33-34) of our lives. Nor to the extent to which Freud's concept of the "family romance" also focuses on crucial, perhaps permanent, parts of our individual and collective lives.

Specifically, reading these remarkable plays can produce in their readers and spectators an uncanny mixture of what *The Winter's Tale* calls "joy" and "terror" (IV.i.1). It thus provides what some psychoanalysts term a "safe haven" for the acknowledgement and therapeutic release of pent-up primitive anxieties (Eagle, 212). In teaching them, however, I do not simplistically suggest that these plays 'reflect' some universal, dehistoricized pattern (although I certainly point out to students how a Freudian reading can fall into that trap) but rather try to find ways by which the patterns Freud gestured to in his concept of the "family romance" are enacted within different historical formations and, therefore, different readers' experiences (see Poster). As a starting point for reading the late plays as family romances, I usually have my students read Freud's short essay, "Family Romances" As with most of Freud's essays, it is surprisingly straightforward as well as highly suggestive and so is appropriate even for an introductory Shakespeare class. With advanced classes, I introduce some more recent rewritings of the Freudian reading of the family, notably the work by Margaret Mahler on separation and individuation and the psychological birth of the human infant, the feminist account of the family by Juliet Mitchell, Deleuze and Guattari's reworking of the oedipal myth, and some extracts from Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. But the Freud essay in itself gives us an agenda that is uncannily powerful for reading the late plays.

Noting that as a person grows up, the liberation of an from the authority of parents is "one of the most necessary though one of the most painful" events of life, Freud describes a number of the family romance's characteristics. All involve the desire to change one's family circumstances-- to have richer or more powerful parents, or not have to share one's parents' love with siblings, for instance. Other symptoms include a boy's hostility towards his father coupled with an intense desire to bring his mother--the subject, says Freud, "of the most intense sexual curiosity"--into "situations of secret infidelity" with him. Other connected phantasies may involve incestuous feelings for siblings, desires to return to fancied (or perhaps real) conditions in early childhood when the child was unindividuated from the mother, and the child's "most intense and momentous" general wish, simply "to be big like his parents." In children, such day-dreams emerge as wishfulfilments with, Freud says, aims that are simultaneously erotic and more generally ambitious--not only to to emulate (or seduce) the

parents but to be free of their control. In adults--and here we approach the specific relevance of the essay to Shakespeare--the symptoms of the family romance re-emerge in desires to discover or recapture a lost state of autonomy, which may be projected, negatively or positively, upon a series of love-objects--lovers, spouses, or children, even (as one of my students suggested) pets--who thereby become incorporated into the neurotic patterns that were laid down early in the adult's own family history.

Contemporary students are aware, perhaps uncomfortably, that our century has not only given us major revaluations of our understanding of ourselves as gendered beings, but also as generational subjects, and as members of that once seemingly stable institution, the family. Like "gender," the word "family" is what Raymond Williams calls a "key word" in our cultural history, one that carries reverberations and contradictions far beyond its mere dictionary meaning: a verbal site of cultural struggle, where shades of meaning betray deeprooted ideological positions. Especially from Freud onwards, our century has seen a marked preoccupation with the psychological dynamics of the family--with, for example, the separation and individuation of child from the mother, a child's discovery of boundary conditions, the development of object relations, delusions of omnipotence and fears of abandonment, and the search for a lost, pre-oedipal, polymorphous sexual fulfillment. The psychoanalytical tradition initiated by Freud provides us with a powerful vocabulary to talk of these stages and crises of individual and familial growth. Despite--as many feminists rightly point out--predicating the psychological narrative upon the development of a male subject, and despite, too, the temptation to universalize its categories, psychoanalysis provides suggestive ways by which we can describe the struggle for differentiation between child and parent, especially between sons and mothers, or (and this is particularly relevant to these plays) daughters and fathers. Without such struggles, the plays seem to assume, there can be no viable identity, no later close and meaningful relations with others, no fulfilling sexual identity.

Shakespeare's male characters, in particular, seem engaged in continuous struggles within and beyond the family to form a secure gendered identity, and to find (or reject) a place for women in that identity. Most particularly in *A Winter's Tale*, as Coppelia Kahn has shown in an essay I make required reading for advanced courses and which can be read and explained by the teacher him or herself with introductory classes, the focus is on the self-destructive insecurities that arise from separation from the mother, here (as elsewhere in the comedies and, not least, some of the tragedies like *Coriolanus* or *Hamlet*) represented by lost innocence, youth, nature. As a man looks back at his childhood, he recalls, often unconsciously, the perilous task of separation and individuation --and transfers some of his ambitions and anxieties upon his adult experiences. Within the traditional patriarchal family, a boy's first object of desire is therefore usually heterosexual, felt in his growing awareness of his mother's otherness and therefore of his own lack. His sense of becoming what his society defines as masculine is always endangered by that primary, profound (perhaps even primeval) oneness with the mother. Whether we "remember" that consciously or--what is certainly the case--try to revert to a core of imaginary oneness into which we simultaneously want to escape and to free ourselves from, we may project these contradictory feelings, often violently, upon our adult lovers, wives, children.

Various aspects of such patterns may be seen at work in all the late plays.

They provide, for instance, something of an explanation for the motifs of incest that critics have often pointed to in *Pericles*, most especially the relational triangle of *Pericles*, *Marina*, and *Thaisa*. Carol Neely quotes Levi-Strauss that incest is a dream "that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing," a myth that is "eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might keep to oneself. In these plays, Neely notes, incestuous involves not only literal incest but to "nonsexual but similar possessive, exclusive, and static bonds between friends, fathers and children, [and] siblings" (*Broken Nuptials*, 169). The incest motif is obviously, even crudely, displayed in the play's clumsy opening scenes, but receives much more subtle and moving treatment in later acts, as we see a parable of the complications that arise within the family constellation. *Marina* exists largely in relation to her father and we watch his struggles to free himself of his self-imposed withdrawal from the storms (literal and metaphorical) that have overwhelmed him through her return as a grown, independent, and (in her promised, though barely developed, marriage). We can also see the idealizations and distortions of the family romance in the lost sons and the father/daughter relations of *Cymbeline* (even in aspects of *Imogen* and *Posthumous*' marriage, with its strong echoes of mother/child tensions and demands); in the generational tensions, the clashes between friends and spouses, sexual jealousy and paranoia, and the losses and returns of children and mother in *The Winter's Tale*; and the generational and familial clashes--not to forget the anger and anxieties of the patriarchal father--in *The Tempest*, where sibling rivalry, betrayed brotherly love, battles over legacies (literal and metaphorical) from parents (also both literal and metaphorical).

It has often been pointed out that the Freudian model of development centers on the male. Shakespeare seems to have had a similar obsession in these plays, focussing especially on the relations between between the male child and his mother, and upon the adult male and a daughter. I usually get some ironical smiles--not least from the women--when the question of men's excessive idealization of their daughters is raised. But there are other places of entry for women readers. Most important are the strong women characters: *Hermione*, *Paulina*, *Imogen*, even (briefly) *Marina*. Are such figures merely projections of the male's need for mother figures to simultaneously want to escape and be subject to? That possibility in itself often provides as spirited a point of discussion for women readers as father/daughter relations. Why has our culture produced such a recurring pattern of male loss and searching? What are the female equivalents? Are such patterns historically contingent? Or built into our basic biogrammar? Why are so many of the mothers missing or lost for so much of the plays? And why is it that a pattern within the family romance is, as Shirley Garner has asked, the all too common male fantasy "that a woman will always forgive a man no matter how much he wrongs her"? (*In Holland et. al.*, 147) *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* are particularly powerful workings-out of this fantasy: it might be instructive to ask whether the forgiveness and reconciliation 'represented' by *Imogen* or *Hermione* are as noble and appropriate as traditional critics have argued. Or do we see these wishfulfilment endings as complex projections of a male desire to project the all-forgiving and once always available mother upon their wives and lovers? Are men in our culture to be condemned, pitied, accepted, for such patterns? Are they built into the basic fantasy structure of being male, or are they characteristic of a particular phase of the history of the patriarchal family and the romances it has engendered?

Of all the late plays, it is particularly worth considering how we might

read *The Winter's Tale* in this context. Shakespeare's interest in this primitive contradiction within masculine identity focuses on a male figure, Leontes, whose separation has been incomplete or problematic--as one can point out self-deprecatingly, it seems to be for many men--and for whom anxiety arises when he is called upon as an adult to be a friend, a husband, a father. As a husband Leontes finds himself once again dependent upon a woman to confirm his identity, and he may easily reenact, either positively or negatively, in displaced or disguised forms, his early crises of masculine identity. Clearly, Leontes can be seen as projecting insecurities upon Hermione that go far beyond their apparent cause. For him, in his version of the family romance, bliss was in childhood, in his myth of an uncomplicated boyhood friendship with Polixenes, before the threat of otherness represented by falling in love, marriage, adulthood intervened to both entice his need to differentiate. According to this reading, best set out by Kahn, I think, Hermione, marvelously serene in her (what many of us may be tempted, however we are thereby caught into a very specific ideology of the family and gender assignment) to see as "natural" motherhood as in her role as wife and friend, seemingly has all the self-completion that he both yearns for and fears. The irrational rejection of Hermione in 1.2 and 2.1 can be read as enacting such contradictions, while Leontes' abjection when he believes Hermione to be dead is the extremity of the child who has destroyed the person whom he most loves and yet from whom he must assert his independence. In his suspicion and persecution of his wife, Leontes can be seen as projecting a nostalgic fantasy of a loss of an undifferentiated world upon her--attacking precisely what we in the audience are attracted by, her apparent serene oneness with her unborn child, her mature sexuality and easy friendship. Whether in idealization, identification, or envy, we too are likely to be disproportionately moved by the situation. Leontes repudiates her because he is threatened by her; and in his rage he adds to the arbitrariness of the political tyrant all the destructiveness of the patriarchally constructed male, along with the irrationality of the child who finds that he must cut himself adrift from his undifferentiated mother and yet who resents having to do so. Many of us are not unaware of our own related feelings--or, in the phrase we use in my classes, we know a friend who is!

For those teachers or students for whom meaning has still to be located somehow 'in' the text or what is supposed to be Shakespeare's own time, the situations to which a reading of these plays as family romances points can still be located within the family structures of Shakespeare's time. The tensions within the patriarchal and specifically the early modern family is a topic that has been much commented upon by social historians and recent feminist/ materialist critics. But a more fruitful way of using the concept is where today, after all, we read and enact both the play and our own familial struggles. --in the present. Many of our students (and maybe not a few teacher), after all, are very actively caught in their own struggles of individuation and differentiation. The utterances and conflicts of all the late plays speak often of aspects of the family romance as we enact them today--situations of generational tension, the reliance on and need to break from family ties, the delusions of omnipotence and fears of abandonment that we experience as children and project upon our adult relationships. Today most of us perceive such patterns as an inescapable part of childhood and the presence of childhood in our later lives. I have found that my students reverberate to these preoccupations and that they find the language of psychoanalysis and certain aspects of developmental psychology both apt and not overly difficult.

Such matters reach, moreover, right into the heart of the remarkable popularity of the late plays this century, not only among critics but on the stage. As I tell my students, in 1988, in London and thereabouts, one was able to see no fewer than two productions of *Pericles* and three each of *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. The remarkable popularity of these plays--by contrast with their relatively low reputation, except in the case of *The Tempest*, in earlier centuries--has been marked by many historians of the theater. It would seem these plays have tapped into something central to the gender, sexual, and familial preoccupations of our age. We are certainly as concerned within our own society with the family and its multiple romances as Shakespeare's was. Yet we should stress (our students will certainly, if encouraged, do so) that the family is by no means idealized in these plays. Where many critics used to see the family as a symbol of stability in both the comedies and romances, it can also be seen as yet another site of instability, a place of contestation between generations, where often one parent (usually the mother) is missing, and where its harmonies are tentative, patched together, and founded on utopian wish rather than realistic expectation. Even here, in the late plays, which according to so many critics, serve to valorize reunited families, do so only through great strains and, as most poignantly in *The Winter's Tale*, without restoring all that was lost. The sourness and reluctance many see in Prospero, too, is partly built on what he perceives as generational and familial betrayal. One of my students asserted that Prospero's simultaneously opposing and favoring his daughter's relationship with Ferdinand was the behavior of "a typical father." After the widespread grins of recognition the class (or at least many of the women in the class) gave her, we needed to pause and probe why that should be.

The assumption here (and, from experience, it seems more of a conclusion thrust upon readers despite their scepticism about the inherent power of 'literature' or 'art') is that when we respond to and in a sense re-produce these plays within our own histories, we are led to draw on some of our most primitive and our most deeply encultured memories. The continued fascination of the late plays is, I suspect, based on the ways they draw out our most primitive experiences, whether we describe those as built into our basic biogrammar or (as some psychoanalysts argue) our fundamental psychological patterns, or as culturally determined, or as a mixture of all these. Indeed, if either a combination of bio-psychological and cultural layering makes up what Freud called the unconscious, then the late romances are among those works that draw most deeply on what that often contentious term stands for. That is, of course, why we call them 'great'--not because they are somehow 'universal', above the material or psychological details of our personal and collective histories, but because they are deeply embedded in those histories and have consequently been read in intriguingly different ways. The role of the teacher becomes, therefore, that of making available to his or her students powerful and flexible languages to describe how those complex and sometimes disturbing experiences are, or might be, engaged. Seeing them in terms of the family romance is one, compelling way.

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