

Public Privates
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[The following are some very preliminary notes for a longish essay on gender identity in Shakespeare.]

The centrality of women in Shakespeare's work, and in particular of the question that appears as the title of Mary Beth Rose's influential essay, "Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?"¹, has become a commonplace of recent studies of Shakespeare. On the other hand, as a participant in a recent SAA seminar put it, given the relative scarcity of mothers in the plays, perhaps one ought to focus attention on the fathers in Shakespeare.² Immediately, however, one runs into profound ambiguity. Consider, for instance, Lear's words as he begins to understand just how thoroughly he has lost status and control:

O how this mother swells up towards my heart!
Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow,
Thy element's below. (2.4.56-58)³

The Riverside edition glosses "mother" as hysteria, but then "hysteria" is the womb itself.⁴ Perhaps one should understand the term figuratively, as meaning that Lear begins to feel the "errant womb" that signals his impending madness. And yet my inclination is to take the passage literally: Lear really does feel the female organ inside himself, displaced from its properly submerged position and rising to strangulate him. To Rose's question, then, I answer as Juliet does when the Nurse, coming from her conference with Romeo, irrelevantly asks where Lady Capulet is:

Where is my mother! why, she is within,
Where should she be? (2.4.58-59).

I first came across a literal reading of Juliet's remark in an avowedly psychoanalytic context, an essay by Elenore and Robert Fliess.⁵ Recent work, however, has allowed me to reconceive the psychological perspective of the Fliesses in a more material and historical mode. Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* has demonstrated in detail the physiological and medical ideas that underlie Renaissance assumptions about female and male genitalia. [To be developed.]

My point of departure is that although such ideas about the genitals of the two sexes privilege maleness as the more perfect sex, at the same time they suggest that maleness can encompass femaleness, and vice versa—that the "mother is within" not only for the female Juliet but also for the male Lear, and that the phallus is "without" not only for Lear but also for Juliet. On the one hand, as Laqueur and others have noted, such convertibility leads to anxieties of all sorts, particularly in the privileged sex. Contact with the female can, as Steven Greenblatt says, provide the warmth that "chafes" the overgrown child from an androgynous adolescent into a man.⁶ On the other hand, contact with the female can transform the male into an "effeminate," as Romeo affirms about himself when he learns that Tybalt has killed Mercutio (3.1.114); and it can reverse mythological identifications, so that Antony, in Cleopatra's "tires" while she wears "his sword Philippan" (2.5.21-22), reverts so much to the condition of the adolescent Hercules that the adult Hercules, Antony's tutelary spirit, "Now leaves him" (4.3.17).

But convertibility of sex—the fact that always the "mother is within"—also raises the possibility that one sex can be in complete control of reproduction. In a commonsensical way, of course, men fantasize about women as the ones who control reproduction—hence the trite observation, central to *Much Ado* as to *Winter's Tale*, that only a mother can know her child to be her own.

The other possibility, that males control reproduction, is present at the level of ideology: it is, one might say, the entire focus of patriarchal rule to subordinate reproduction to male control. The biological counterpart of ideology, however, is equally powerful. In European history, the desire for male control of reproduction is articulated early, for instance in Jason's earnest statement in *Medea* that

It would have been better far for men
To have got their children in some other way, and women
Not to have existed. Then life would have been good. (573-75)⁷

In *The Tempest*, perhaps, the appropriation of reproduction that Jason wishes to have is more or less accomplished, albeit at the level of mystified ideology.⁸ The same idea is more effectively at work at an even earlier stage of history, in the appropriation of reproduction by the male God of the Old Testament, whose conception is entirely intellectual and yet produces offspring much as would a woman's.⁹ Benedick's rejection of marriage in *Much Ado* provides an anxiety-laden version of the desire for such male control:

That a woman conceiv'd me, I thank her;
that she brought me up, I likewise give her
most humble thanks; but that I will have a
recheate winded in my forehead, or hang my
bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women
shall pardon me. Because I will not do them
the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself
the right to trust none; and the fine is (for
the which I may go the finer), I will live a
bachelor. (1.1.238-46)

Of course, in *Much Ado*, as in the comedies generally, the fantasy of male sufficiency collapses fairly quickly. Benedick concludes that since "the world must be peopled" (2.3.242) he will be "horribly in love" (2.3.235) with Beatrice and marry her. Indeed, Benedick's anxiety is already evidence that the ideology on which male control is founded is suspect. In the final cuckold joke of *Much Ado*, Benedick seems to acknowledge that marriage will not be an institutional guarantee of male appropriation of the womb: "There is no staff more reverent than one tipp'd with horn" (5.4.123-24), he says to Don Pedro.

Nonetheless, the sexually ambiguous world of Shakespeare's plays locates the fantasy of absolute male control of reproduction squarely in the ideology of patriarchal social structures. When at the beginning of *Much Ado* Benedick rejects women, it is because he fears being made a cuckold and so, as Carol Cook has convincingly shown, losing control over his own self definition.¹⁰ The psychological motive for misogyny is almost palpable in the dynamics of Benedick's desire to control his self-presentation; and perhaps one can understand the desire for such control to be exactly parallel to the desire to control reproduction. But *Much Ado* also demonstrates the political result of the failure to effect either form of control: cuckoldry, presented in the play in the person of Don John, the illegitimate-and, it seems, therefore bellicose-half brother of Don Pedro. Don John is a constant reminder of the concrete dangers of not controlling reproduction, of allowing or encountering an "errant womb."

By contrast, the histories, especially the second tetralogy, seem to erase the womb as the central issue of legitimacy. Instead, the histories are obsessively political in their presentation of legitimacy, and the practicalities of such political questions seem to foreclose the patriarchal concerns so evident in the comedies. Nonetheless, in the sequence of the two tetralogies, and in the plays' increasingly desperate search for legitimacy, it becomes clearer and clearer that the woman is absolutely essential to monarchy. It is a critical commonplace that Richard II affiliates himself with Christ,

and increasingly so as Richard goes on his *via dolorosa* to Pomfret. Less obvious, perhaps, is that Richard's assumption of divine right also presupposes a chistic function, one closely associated with the medieval image of an androgynous Christ, female as well as male:

As a long-parted mother with her child
Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,
So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,
And do thee favors with my royal hands.
(3.2.8-11)¹¹

Richard's failure, then, is a failure of the androgynous model to guarantee male control of legitimacy. As he awaits death, Richard says

My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts.
(5.5.6-8)

But it is a mere sterile conception of the intellect.

Richard's loss to Henry IV does not certify that the sword is the mode by which legitimacy is established. On the contrary, Henry V discovers that without the right mother, he must constantly flourish his blade to affirm legitimacy. Henry V's mode of legitimating himself is therefore instructive. Not only does Henry V claim the throne of France via the female line, but he uses his right to the French throne overtly to lay claim to legitimacy in his English possessions: "No king of England, if not king of France" (2.2.193). Moreover, as the play insistently declares, the right to France depends on Henry's possessing the body of the French princess. From the penetration of Harfleur's walls (3.3) to Katherine's misconception about English "foot" and "count" (3.4.52- 57) is one continuous movement, certified by the elision of maids and cities in the French King's acceptance of Henry as his heir: "the cities [are] turn'd into a maid; for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never ent'red" (5.2.321-23). Henry's ultimate failure to "redeem time," as he promises in 1Henry IV (1.2.217) may be simply proof of Fluellen's affirmation that "Fortune is an excellent moral" (3.6.38): but the circular motion of Fortune's wheel is, as the Epilogue of Henry V reminds us, one that takes us back to the future that Shakespeare had already represented on the stage, in the first tetralogy, where a maid destroys and a mother curses. One may well see in Henry V's failure a failure of the male to control the "mother."

The tragedies, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Coriolanus*, in one way or other detail the danger of an actually or supposedly errant "mother," whether in a disobedient daughter or an apparently lecherous wife, or in the uncontrolled passion of a father or husband or son.¹² The ideological construction of the womb in the tragedies needs to be examined.

Sometimes, as Paulina says when she accosts Hermione's jailer, the womb is the enfranchiser. So, although Perdita "was prisoner to the womb," yet now she "is/ By law and process of great Nature thence/ Freed and enfranchis'd" (2.2.57-59). However, far more commonplace from the male point of view is the perspective implied in *Love's Labours Lost*, when Navarre's desire for immortality crystallizes, "Not [in] marble nor the gilded monuments/ Of princes" (Son. 55.1-2), but rather in the more tenuous "war against your own affections/ And the huge army of the world's desires" (1.1.9-10). The inescapable inference is that, for Navarre at least, the womb may be a fine and private place, but those who there do meet end up dead.

The trope that underlies Navarre's concern has a noble pedigree in European literature. [To be developed.]

In the plays the enfleshment of spirit enabled by the womb suggests that, if there is an enfranchisement such as Paulina alleges, it is only into certain death. Paulina

suggests as much, since she specifies that the new-born Perdita is subject to “The anger of the King” (2.2.60), who has already condemned her to death. In sharp contrast to Navarre, however, Paulina locates death in social institutions rather than in nature—in Leontes’ prison rather than Hermione’s womb. Thus Paulina’s construction of death is complexly inscribed in patriarchal ideology. From the male point of view—which is to say, from the point of view of the ideology rather than of its demystifiers—it is “great Nature” itself, not the ideology, that is guilty of the inevitable death. So, Leontes orders Antigonus to expose Perdita to the rigors of nature where, as Lear says, being “unaccommodated [wo]man” (3.4.106-107), she can “feel what naked wretches feel” (3.4.34) and so die knowing that to “Allow not nature more than nature needs./ Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (2.4.266-67).

The supplement to nature, which would comprehend Lear’s “true need” (2.4.270), but which is notably absent from the heath scenes of Lear, is Polixenes’ “art/ Which does mend Nature” (4.4.95-96). According to Perdita, art specifically introduces the possibility of “bastards” into nature (4.4.83). Polixenes, on the contrary, argues that

over that art
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid,
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race. (4.4.90-95).

On the surface of this speech, Polixenes seems to argue against his own position, since he suggests that a “wild” stock such as Perdita seems to be may give rise to nobility. The contradiction is only apparent, however. Polixenes’ language grounds the entire hierarchy of patriarchy, defining “gentler,” “baser,” and “nobler” in its discourse. For Polixenes art is affiliated evidently with the hierarchical patriarchy of which he, except for Florizel’s affection for Perdita and hence dis-affection with his father, is the Bohemian sinecure. That he makes “art” a function of nature suggests the degree to which ideology is perceived as naturalized by those who are, in Roland Barthes’ term, its consumers.¹³ In short, Polixenes’ language remystifies patriarchal ideology.

In the event, of course, Polixenes’ insistence on patriarchal rights over Florizel produces for him exactly the same loss of dynastic possibility that Leontes’ jealousy has already produced. As Florizel says to Perdita, her elevation

cannot fail, but by
The violation of my faith, and then
Let nature crush the sides o’ th’ earth together,
And mar the seeds within! Lift up thy looks.
From my succession wipe me, father, I
Am heir to my affection. (4.4.476-81)

In other words, one can conclude that Paulina is right, that the ideology, the “art,” and not “nature” or the womb is responsible for death—or rather, here, generational suicide. But then again, the play is saved from such tragedy purely by art, not only Paulina’s, with which the play concludes, but more immediately Camillo’s. He it is who will have Florizel “royally appointed, as if/ The scene you play were mine” (4.4.592-93) and who convinces Perdita, inartistic though she claims to be, that “the play so lies/ That I must bear a part” (4.4.655-56). The play, and of course Camillo and Paulina in particular “lie”: and in that lie is Apollo’s Sibyl confirmed true.

¹Rose, “Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.3 (1991): 291-314.

²The seminar, titled “Constructing Masculinity in Shakespeare and directed by Gary Waller

and Mary Ellen Lamb, took place at the April, 1992 meeting of the SAA. The comment was made by Phyllis Rackin.

3All references to Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 1974).

4The Arden edition refers the reader to Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*, in which one of the people mentioned by Harsnett suffers from "the mother," and to Edward Jordan's *A Brief Discourse of a Disease called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1605), which makes "the mother" parallel in meaning to "Passio Hysterica, Suffocatio, Priefocatio, and Strangulatus uteri, Caducus Matricis." Oddly enough, Kenneth Muir, who presents the text based on the edition of W. J. Craig, ends the note as follows: "Craig thinks the word may be only a contraction of smother." That sentence does not quite engulf all the evident associations with women's organs. *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1957) 85.

5Fliess and Fliess, "Shakespeare's Juliet and Her Nurse," *American Imago* 33 (1976): 244-60.

6See Greenblatt's discussion of "friction" in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 73-93. 7Euripides, *The Medea*, trans. Rex Warner, in *Euripides, I, The Complete Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955) 77. 8In an unpublished paper titled " ," Mary Ellen Lamb points out that Prospero. See also Mary Loeffelholz, "Two Masques of Ceres and Proserpine: *Comus* and *The Tempest*," *Re-membering Milton*:

Essays on the Texts and Traditions, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson. New York: Methuen, 1987) 25-30.

9See Gerda Lerner's analysis in *The Creation of Patriarchy*. 10Cook, "'The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor': Reading Gender Difference in *Much Ado About Nothing*," *PMLA* 101.2 (1986): 186-202.

11See Carolin Bynum Walker, *Jesus as Mother 'Tis Pity She's a Whore* treats the fraternal passion straightforwardly. In Shakespeare the fraternal is displaced. It appears as *Syracusan Antipholus*' desire for a brother and his apparent sister-in-law, or as the confusion of brother and sister in *Twelfth Night*.

13Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*