REVIEWS

Catherine Belsey. ***Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture***. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Dorothea Kehler
San Diego State University

Here is another of Catherine Belsey's always provocative and well-researched books. Although Belsey nowhere cites *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels' work stands behind her project of demystifying "family values." Her focus, however, is not economic. Rather, she adumbrates ways in which the ideological fiction of patriarchal family values, entailing obligatory heterosexual monogamy, was constructed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She exposes the shadow side of the hierarchical nuclear family as an archetypal site of personal harm and argues that sentimentalizing the family often goes hand in hand with regressive political practice. Belsey's strategy for demystification is to read western cultural history through its visual as well as written texts, emphasizing Genesis and Shakespeare. The former tells the story of the first family scarred by betrayal, banishment, and murder; the latter takes as its signifying constants marital jealousy and sibling rivalry.

Belsey is at pains to distinguish her own Lacanian material version of cultural history — "history at the level of the signifier" (5) — from "living history" (reenactment) that attempts to obliterate our present frame of reference, or conventional historiography that reads (i.e., totalizes) the past through our present values. In contrast, cultural history traces representation or ideology, which is often distinct from practice. The cultural historian is self-conscious and something of a formalist, a close reader of visual and verbal texts, attuned to the *aporia* and unconformities or inconsistencies so prevalent in early modern England. Such unconformities characterize received ideas concerning both the Reformation displacement of the Catholic ideal of celibacy and the courtly celebration of adultery with the Protestant idealization of romantic love leading to marriage. These unconformities — unexpected, subversive, or injurious consequences of ideologically enjoined behaviors — are illustrated in chapters on *Love's Labor's Lost*, *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Hamlet*, all in relation to Genesis.

Whereas in *The Subject of Tragedy* Belsey read the Middle Ages monolithically as a pre-capitalist and therefore quasi-utopian period, in *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* she warns against nostalgic reductive paradigms and bases her argument on early modern England's myriad dissonances. She argues persuasively that Shakespeare, even in his heroine-dominated comedies, evokes the ambivalence of the age toward marriage based on romantic love. So seductive, artful, and ebullient a remedy for solitude and desire as romantic love was seen by many as an innately unstable foundation on which to build family or society. Belsey argues that it still is, though she does not suggest less unstable and less potentially threatening alternatives. Similarly, deconstructive theorizing on behalf of her approach raises unanswered questions. The David Irving case was in the news as I was reading *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, according to which "the real was no more knowable then [when events in question occurred] than it is now," for we are left with a signifier "in which not only the real, but meaning too, while not simply lost, is forever differed and deferred, relegated by signifying practice itself to uncertainty and undecidability" (12-13). On Belsey's view, how can a court determine that Irving was not maligned, that holocaust deniers are deliberately misrepresenting history? That is, how can one tell what is history and what is not?

A great strength of *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* lies in the fascinating images of cultural history that Belsey has unearthed. (The book contains forty-three plates.) In connection with *Cymbeline* she brings to bear original research on Renaissance iconography found on bed carvings and tapestries. That she finds representations of Eve's temptation, the fall, and mortality on these nuptial beds supports another of her key points. Even in Paradise Adam felt the lack of a companion, so God gave him a helpmate in whom he found joy but who destroyed his joy in Paradise: "marriage both repairs and reaffirms the originary loss" (75). Funeral monuments are relevant to a chapter on *The Winter's Tale*, a drama of sexual jealousy that takes the life of a child. Here Belsey traces the development of the emotionally charged nuclear family over the course of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries by examining the representations of husbands and wives, of parents and children, on tomb sculptures.

Belsey ends her study of Shakespeare's plays with a chapter called "Sibling Rivalry: 'Hamlet' and the First Murder." Here she examines depictions of the Cain and Abel story on early modern household goods, observing that the first nuclear family — Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel — was figured both as a consolation prize for exclusion from Paradise and a new breeding ground for sin. Following Lacan's explanation of infant rivalry as a source of self-identity, Belsey associates sibling rivalry between Hamlet Senior and his brother with Eve's sin punished by mortal-

ity, and links these narrative elements to frequently erotic images of the Dance of Death. In *Hamlet* the ghost returns from death to seduce, as it were, his son into avenging him, albeit at the risk of damnation. Abusing his patriarchal authority and Hamlet's filial love, this ghostly father turns his son into a grim reaper whose harvest includes most of the characters in the play. Triumphantly, the author asks, "Whatever made us think of marriage as closure, or associate the parental relationship with the promise of security?" (173).

If Belsey seems eager to deny the contentment that people have long sought and often found in the family, the same could be said for Shakespeare. Contentment is not the meat that playwrights feed upon. Even critics seek more compelling subject matter. Besides, at a time when politicians inundate us with sentimental platitudes in lieu of a helping hand, debunking serves as a valuable corrective. Most valuable is Belsey's conscientious documentation of the provenance of "family values" in early modern England. ❋