

even such is the appropriate excellence of her chosen poet, of our own Shakespeare, himself a nature humanized, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness.<sup>53</sup>

Setting aside (if one can) the bardolatry there, I would underline two of Coleridge's remarks, although apparently contradictory: the sense that a play 'shapes as it develops from within', with at the same time Shakespeare's 'understanding directing self-consciously'. The 'pre-determined forms' of psychoanalysis offer no help in understanding either process.

## *Feminist Stereotypes: Misogyny, Patriarchy, Bombast*

We know well that habits and institutions which are now reasonably criticized as grossly unfair and unjust — for example, in the relations between rich and poor — were not criticized by our ancestors in this way, partly because, embedded in a different way of life, our ancestors had different targets for criticism from the standpoint of justice, and needed to imagine, or to anticipate, a different way of life, if they were to see the then prevailing relations between rich and poor as grossly unjust.

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Feminist Shakespeare criticism is a relatively recent genre. The first courses in Women's Studies were set up in America in 1966, leading to the foundation of the National Women's Studies Association in 1977; the first feminist book explicitly devoted to Shakespeare, Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, appeared in 1975; while 1976 saw the formation of the Modern Language Association sections on 'Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare', and on 'Marriage and the Family' in Shakespeare (Greer 1988, pp. 616, 629). Thereafter national and regional meetings spread across America at such a rate that by 1988 an editor of a journal's special issue concerned with 'Women in the Renaissance' could write that it is now 'difficult to imagine a Renaissance conference that would not include a wide range of papers devoted to women writing and / or representations of women in works by male authors'.<sup>2</sup> The success in the universities has been astonishing, with '250,000 students at present reading Women's Studies of one sort or another' in America alone (Greer 1988, p. 616). A veritable explosion of publications — book-length studies, collections of writing by Renaissance women, anthologies of modern criticism — have transformed the subject in a remarkably short time.<sup>3</sup>

At this point I feel the need to distinguish between feminism as a political movement intended to correct unjust discriminations that go back, in Western society, to Aristotle and beyond (I need hardly mention Islam), and feminist literary criticism. On the political issue, it is surely right that here, as with other marginalised groups — the elderly, the handicapped, blacks, people of minority religions or lower castes, ethnic groups, political prisoners — our feelings of concern and compassion ought to issue into whatever forms of action are available to us as agents in a free

society. But does that include the activity of literary criticism? Must we demonstrate our virtue, our ideological or religious correctness, by the way in which we write about literature? Ought we to seek out novels or plays which we can excoriate for endorsing colonialism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, class-hatred? Yes of course, one answer would be, provided that you find the right books, those that really do encourage such repulsive attitudes. The danger is, though, that the resulting criticism, although displaying the right social virtues, may be completely uninteresting as literary criticism, or even totally misguided. Politically motivated, perhaps ethically justifiable, it will not necessarily tell us anything about the way in which a novel or play works, how it is structured in terms of plot and language, what qualities of creativity or imagination it may display, what ethical position it takes up on other issues. Politically guided criticism might even value, on ideological grounds, work that other critics would dismiss as propaganda, not art.

Throughout this book I have been arguing for a literary criticism that respects the integrity of a play or novel, addresses itself to the individuality of each work in its historical context, without reducing the enormous range and variety of imaginative writing to some lowest common denominator. The problem with explicitly political criticism is that it tends to politicise virtually every element of a work, and to ignore non-political issues. Some writers even claim that all writing is political, and that to deny literature an inherent politics would be 'quietistic'. But, as the Marxist critic Catherine Gallagher replies, the argument is tautological: 'Such reasoning begins with the assumption that everything has a politics; a denial of this assumption must also have a politics, no doubt reactionary. Such reasoning is impervious to evidence. . . .' (Gallagher 1989, p. 44). Anyone willing to consider the evidence, I maintain, will concede that while some works do indeed raise political issues, others do not, or only faintly; and that to impose the expectation of a political dimension on everything we read is as unreasonable as to impose a religious dimension on it. Both expectations will distort the text, especially since the 'politics' or 'religion' imposed will be our politics, our religion. For instance, 'the politics of the family' is a recognisable post-1960s concept which, when applied to literature of the past, may perhaps produce data which speak to our preoccupations, but will not attend to those in the texts of that age, or may actively falsify them. For, as my epigraph from Stuart Hampshire puts it, our ancestors were 'embedded in a different way of life', had different concerns, took for granted situations which seem to us unjust, and devoted much energy and concern to issues — such as the salvation of their souls in the after-life, or the maintaining of their virtue in this world — which seem to many people today of little importance. A properly historical approach would recognise this.

If 'first-wave' feminism refers to the generation of Virginia Woolf, its 'second wave' arriving in the late 1960s, the general issue is whether such a

new school of criticism can adapt itself to the literature of the past, especially something as remote as the Renaissance. In particular, we must ask, has this second wave produced independent criticism, or does a group having shared assumptions, common methods, produce identical readings? As recently as 1980 the editors of an influential symposium could declare that 'feminist criticism of Shakespeare is still too new to have established any orthodoxies' (Lenz *et al.* 1980, p. 12). But already then, I think, and certainly in the decade since, a number of orthodox positions can be clearly defined and evaluated, some of which, I shall argue, damage our chances of understanding Shakespeare. What follows is a critique of those aspects which, as with other critical schools evaluated here, result in a partial Shakespeare — seen in part; used for a partisan goal. I repeat, my remarks do not presuppose any hostility to the cause of women's studies; nor, even less, to the movement seeking to redress the injustices done to women since the beginning of Western civilisation. What concerns me here is the injustice done to Shakespeare.

## I

Carol Neely, writing in 1981, defined three modes of feminist criticism, which she called 'compensatory, justificatory, transformational'. The first type, compensatory, 'declares women characters (or authors) worthy of and in need of a new kind of attention'. It has focussed on the 'powerful, prominent women' in Shakespeare, restoring to them 'their virtues, their complexity, and their power, compensating for traditional criticism which has minimized or stereotyped them' — Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Cleopatra, and Desdemona are all up-valued in the process (Neely 1981, p. 6). Neely recognised that this search for 'positive role models' has certain dangers: 'the heroines tend to be viewed in a partial vacuum, unnaturally isolated from the rest of the play, the Shakespearean canon, and the culture in which that canon is rooted' (*ibid.*, pp. 6–7). Further, the process of singling out these women and 'the framework within which they are valued', she observed, can become biased, 'subject to contamination by the sex-role stereotypes of the culture in which the criticism exists and which it is reacting against' (p. 7). That is, feminist critics, 'influenced by their own battles for equality, . . . may overcompensate and attribute inappropriately or too enthusiastically to women characters qualities traditionally admired in men — power, aggressiveness, wit, sexual boldness'. This is a case of 'reversing but not discarding the conventional stereotypes', and it cannot easily cope either with the women who are not heroines, or — a more damaging concession, one may feel — 'with the men who are important to all of Shakespeare's women' (p. 7).

Neely's second mode was 'justificatory criticism, which acknowledges the

existence in Shakespeare's plays and in his culture of the traditional dichotomy, of the stereotyping of women, of the constraints of patriarchy', and then applies this knowledge to justify 'the limitations of some women characters and the limiting conceptions of women held by male characters' (p. 7). These 'limitations' are then said to be culturally induced. Critics using this approach explore the roles of 'women — heroines, and especially, victims — in the male-defined and male-dominated world of the plays, showing how their roles are circumscribed by political, economic, familial, and psychological structures' (p. 8). Such critics find support, as Neely put it, in 'varied analyses of patriarchal society by historians like Lawrence Stone or anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss', who have traced the 'dominance-subordination relations' between men and women. This mode, too, has its dangers. Just as the first approach finds it hard to define the heroines' characteristics 'without reverting to some version of sex-role stereotypes, the second mode has difficulty assessing patriarchy's varied quality and weight from play to play without falsely rigidifying it. Justificatory critics differ over whether Shakespeare defends patriarchal structures, attacks them, or merely represents them'. Whatever their conclusion, Neely believed, the approach itself 'may be led to make the structures more monolithic or oppressive than they are, to minimise both the freedom of action of individual women within them' and the influence these women have on the patriarchal structures themselves: 'the result may be depressing — and also unbalanced' (p. 9).

Faced with these opposed goals, 'powerful women' as against 'oppressive patriarchy', a third mode examines the interaction between the two, asking 'not simply what women do or what is done to them, but what meaning these actions have and how this meaning is related to gender'. Neely called this mode 'transformational because of its subject — the mutually transforming roles and attitudes of men and women . . . and because of its goal — which is not only to compensate for or justify traditional criticism but to transform it' (p. 9). Although she did not recognise it, Neely's account of this third mode shows that the background discipline that underpins the literary criticism has also shifted. If in the first mode it was basic feminism (putting more emphasis on neglected women), and in the second social history of a particular kind (patriarchal society), in this third mode the relevant background authority is psychoanalysis. Critics in the transformational mode, as she put it, 'interrogate the relations between male idealization of and degradation of women', some showing how the 'idealization of women in the comedies serves to alleviate the heroes' anxieties about sex — as does the disguise of the heroines and their ultimate submission to men in marriage' (revealing, I presume, the women's matching 'anxieties about sex'). Other critics 'show how male misogyny in the tragedies is a defense against male fears of feminization and powerlessness, and, ironically, brings about the very loss of potency which men fear'. In these concepts of anxiety, fear, compensation we recognise, as

Neely did not, the mental world of Freudianism, and it is perhaps because of her closeness to that world that Neely confessed that her perspective on transformational criticism was 'not detached enough for its limitations to be fully apparent' (p. 10).

Carol Neely's account of these three modes was clearly conceived and balanced in judgment. Other feminists confirm, but also qualify her emphases. There are, it seems to me, two main issues, one contemporary, the other historical. The contemporary issue is the ultimate goal of feminist Shakespeare criticism. According to the editors of one of the earlier anthologies, such criticism 'is not only and not always feminocentric, for it examines both men and women and the social structures that shape them'; but it is nonetheless 'avowedly partisan; it takes the woman's part' (Lenz *et al.* 1980, pp. 3, 12). According to Gayle Greene, such criticism 'presupposes a feminist perspective', one that 'both originates from and participates in the larger effort of feminism — the liberation of women from oppressive social structures and stereotypes' (Greene 1981, p. 30). It has a commitment to 'social change' that makes it "criticism with a cause, engaged criticism . . . revolutionary" (*ibid.*, pp. 33–4). Or, as an Australian feminist puts it, its goal is "to search for the origins of women's oppression and therefore to develop strategies for changing that oppression" (*cit.* Greer 1988, p. 616).

The fullest recent statement of this conception of feminist literary-critical goals comes from Lynda E. Boose. Responding to criticisms that 'the past decade of feminist analysis of family, sex, and marriage' had not been historically grounded, but was 'psychoanalytically based and textually rooted' — that is, supposedly, directly derived from the reading of texts — Boose acknowledges their truth. Indeed, she finds it

thoroughly consistent with the feminist goal of liberating women from their history that the mainstream feminist interpretations of Shakespeare did indeed marginalize the historical and concentrate instead on the literary text. The text, at least, contained representations of women and could thus be used as a mirror in which modern women and men could recognize — and begin to change — the reflected image of a history of oppressive sexual and familial relations. (Boose 1987, p. 735)

However, the 'psychoanalytical approach adopted within the academy' — reproducing what she calls 'the essentialized notion of gender embedded in Freudian determinism' — had its disadvantages, too, chiefly in keeping 'feminist investigations focussed on given relationships within patriarchal family structure rather than on stepping outside and demanding an overturning of the structure itself' (*ibid.*, pp. 736–7).

The obvious contemporary issue, then, is whether it is right to 'use' a Shakespeare play as a text for what Boose describes as 'applied politics', an attempt to change not just the academy (as Neely wants), but society itself. What happens to works of literature when put to these uses? The

further question is whether Shakespeare's plays actually do contain 'representations' of women, or of contemporary social attitudes and structures, in sufficient detail, or as a conscious programme, for us to be able to use them as reliable raw material for a sociohistorical analysis. That seems to me an enormous assumption, made unconsciously or at any rate unquestioningly by all feminist critics. Do the plays 'represent' their society accurately? Was that their main aim; and is it an inevitable component of every literary work? Does Shakespeare, dramatizing Greco-Roman history, Italian romance, medieval-Tudor chronicles, invariably — irrespective of the genre and dramatic conventions within which he worked — reveal the attitudes of his society, or indeed his own attitudes? Such awkward questions are not often asked.

The second issue, involving historical attitudes to women, has had some discussion, along a pleasantly wide spectrum. At one extreme is Juliet Dusinberre, enthusiastically stating that feminism, 'the struggle for women's rights', existed in Shakespeare's day, with all the attendant properties of the modern women's movement: 'the ideology, the literature, the social reform, the activism, and the increased awareness necessary to all of them dominated the society for which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote their plays' (Dusinberre 1975, p. 1). This claim, although still echoed by uncritical writers (Dreher 1986, p. 115), has not found much endorsement from feminist critics with a historical training.<sup>4</sup> Lisa Jardine distanced herself from these 'extravagant claims', expressing puzzlement that some feminist historians should be 'so eager to see emerging emancipation in the seventeenth century, and especially to read liberation into concessions which they would readily recognise as trivial in their own day' (Jardine 1983, p. 63). Linda Bamber also rejected the assimilation of Shakespeare 'into the system of feminist ideas', insisting on his 'indifference to, independence of, and distance from this system'. As she put it, 'only some plays, or some portions of some plays, can satisfy our desire as feminists to share common ground with this great writer' (Bamber 1982, p. 2). Marianne Novy agreed: 'we can learn a lot from Shakespeare about how far a brilliant man can go in trying to understand women. . . . We cannot learn from him the new possibilities for being a woman in the nonsexist society that feminists hope to create, nor should we expect to' (Novy 1981, p. 26).<sup>5</sup>

Linda Woodbridge, in the most impressive book yet written on women in the English Renaissance, found, indeed, an inherent contradiction in the claims that Shakespeare 'anticipated the women's movement by four hundred years'. Modern feminism, she wrote, believes in 'the essential intellectual, emotional, and moral equality of the sexes', independent of the valuations of gender made by the culture around them, while 'Renaissance defenses of women' — I italicise the word to make it clear that such works are produced by the supporters of women, not their enemies — 'constantly emphasize the differences between men and women' as if these

belonged to nature, not culture (Woodbridge 1984, p. 3). These culturally produced attitudes — admirably analysed by Ian Maclean (Maclean 1980) — were almost universal in this period, and Shakespeare was no exception, however much we try to remake him in our image. As Woodbridge put it:

We are tempted to assume that not only did Shakespeare know and love women, as he truly did, and not only does he occasionally allow them to speak movingly in their own defense (a privilege he grants even to villains, so why not to women?), but he was also conversant with all the modern notions about sex-stereotyping, socialization, the economics of sexism, and so on.

But the fact is that 'feminism as we know it did not exist in Shakespeare's time', and there is 'little evidence that he was ahead of his time in his attitudes toward women' (*ibid.*, p. 222). Where Shakespeare differs from other writers, we might want to say, is in the breadth of his depiction of life, and the depth of his sympathy for almost all facets of human behaviour — setting aside hypocrisy, evil, and other forms of destructiveness. Given an oeuvre of such richness it is inevitable that he will dramatise issues which speak to us, the relationships between men and women forming, obviously enough, an important element in the construction of a good society in the comedies, and its destruction in the tragedies. But to concentrate on this element alone, or this at the expense of others, can distort the plays, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly.

## II

Where Lynda Boose saw feminists 'using' Shakespeare's texts 'as a mirror' showing 'the reflected image of a history of oppressive sexual and familial relations', it seems to me that what some feminist critics put between the reader and the play is not a plane but a distorting mirror, in particular one that produces an anamorphic image. In anamorphic or 'perspective' art, as the Renaissance called it, the artist creates either specific objects (such as the skull in Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors') or whole compositions which appear distorted unless they are seen from a coded viewing-point. Once the spectator takes up the right position the forms are restored to their normal shape and size:

Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon  
Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry  
Distinguish form. (Richard II, 2.2.18ff)

If Shakespeare's plays are viewed exclusively in terms of women, men, sexual relationships, social attitudes, or used by a pressure-group for explicit political purposes, the distortion becomes general and permanent,

'nothing but confusion'. There is no longer any viewing-point which will resolve the plays back into their original proportion, or 'distinguish form'.

The simplest type of distortion is to see these plays as documents in the wars between the sexes. Carol Neely has noted that feminist criticism 'may tend to employ what might be called reverse sexism, attacking and stereotyping male characters and male critics'. This becomes a way of reversing 'the conventional stereotypes, representing female characters as active, powerful, rational, and male characters as passive, weak, unhinged'. She finds this approach 'understandable', but judges it 'neither a necessary nor a sufficient determinant of feminist critical style' (Neely 1981, pp. 4-5). The problem with this approach is that it tends to indict 'men' as such. Paula S. Berggren writes disapprovingly of 'the men' at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies having 'a glory of self-delivery (Hamlet leaping in Ophelia's grave, Othello pulling out his weapon, Lear with his looking glass)' (Berggren 1980, p. 25): the women have no such heroic moment. In the late plays, she feels, 'the tragic predicament afflicts male and female protagonists equally, but the men remain more comfortably self-indulgent in their pain' (*ibid.*, p. 28). As for the 'misogyny' she finds there, it is obvious who's really to blame: 'when men revile women, they cry out against their own failures' (p. 26). The editors of this volume take the same line about the misogyny in *Cymbeline* (2.5.19-33): it 'degrades women, but it degrades Posthumus more. The vices he attributes to women are, of course, his own' (Lenz *et al.* 1980, p. 14). In rather similar vein Janice Hays discusses 'the Distrust of Women' in Shakespeare, and finds that in Shakespeare, as throughout human history, women are 'always the agents of giving and sacrifice, men the receivers of their sacrificial gift' (Hays 1980, p. 92). This is perhaps what Neely means by 'reverse sexism': if so, it is hard to see why we should take it any more seriously than sexism itself. If the human race has been blind in one eye for so long, does it help to put out the other?

If 'men' are not the target, then 'patriarchy' is. Here feminists have drawn on social history, particularly the kind of social history written by Lawrence Stone, who is immensely popular with some feminists because he tells them what they want to hear. Often quoted, for instance, is his description of the 'sixteenth-century aristocratic family' as being patrilinear, primogenital, and 'patriarchal, in that the husband and father lorded it over his wife and children with the quasi-absolute authority of a despot'.<sup>6</sup> This account of the aristocratic family is then taken as describing all other families, at whatever place in society or point in time, and generalised as an invariant feature of Renaissance life. Many readers of Stone's later book, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977) have been so impressed by the amount of data it contains that they have not realised the degree to which Stone slanted his interpretation towards very personal emphases, and how bitterly many of his points have been contested by other historians.<sup>7</sup> The now-canonical view of the rigidly

authoritarian family in the seventeenth century, dominated by the father, has been vigorously challenged by several recent researchers, and the case against Stone seems unanswerable.<sup>8</sup>

Stone attempted to overturn our whole perception of human relationships in early modern England, describing it as a period starved of warmth, riddled with neurotic distrust and hostility. According to his idiosyncratic mixture of neo-Freudianism and Whig history, in the period from 1500 to 1700 children were treated in ways which permanently distorted their psyches and made them warped adults. The practices of swaddling babies for the first few months, of giving them to wet-nurses (in fact, less than 5% of the population could afford to do this), of systematically breaking their wills by prolonged physical and psychological punishment (Stone's sensationalist account of flogging in schools may have some basis in fact, but there are no grounds for thinking that parents practiced such violence) — all these evil habits, together with the fact that many parents died prematurely, meant that children suffered forms of deprivation that scarred them for ever. Their parents were not over-concerned at their children's deaths, for they knew that child mortality rates were high, and so did not bother to invest any love or feeling in their offspring. As for marriages, they were loveless, on the whole, the father and husband forcing his family to obey his repressive wishes (such as attending household prayers!), denying the wife any independence or status. Children were just disposed of in marriage by the father, whose only considerations were money and land. This whole repressive structure began to collapse in the eighteenth century, age of enlightenment, when people suddenly learned to trust each other, discovered parental love and companionate marriage for the first time, and slaughtered the patriarch. At this point, too, thanks to the influence of the novel, men and women allowed the idea of romantic love to enter their lives, for all the output of poets and dramatists over the previous three hundred years concerned with love as the basis for marriage and indeed all other relationships had been regarded as a dangerous fantasy, indulged in only by a handful of idle young courtiers. The poetry of Wyatt and Surrey, Spenser, Sidney, Donne, the Cavaliers, Rochester, or the plays of Shakespeare, Dekker, Fletcher, and all the rest, were mere escapist fodder, neither reflecting real-life attitudes nor influencing behaviour.

Every detail in Stone's thesis has been questioned by competent historians, and I need neither summarise nor extend their refutation.<sup>9</sup> But a few points should be made here, in the interest of balance. One source of evidence mistreated by Stone is the literature on marriage, first analysed by Chilton Powell in a pioneering study published in 1917, and recently given an important corrective by Kathleen Davies.<sup>10</sup> Powell argued that whereas Catholicism, and conservative elements of the Church of England, continued to regard marriage as 'a kind of necessary evil' intended for the procreation of children and the avoidance of sin, the Puritans (or Reformers), influenced by Luther and his followers, had a much more

positive concept of matrimony'. They saw it as an 'honourable and natural society of man and woman', having been 'instituted for the mutual blessing and benefit of husband and wife', and their teaching emphasised 'mental and spiritual satisfaction in marriage rather than mere physical' (Powell, pp. 94, 121). Davies showed that while Powell was correct in emphasising the importance of mutuality in Puritan attitudes to marriage, this was neither new nor specifically Puritan, since similar pronouncements can be found in pre-Reformation texts, and even in some medieval sources. In these treatises, often reprinted, marriage is seen as a partnership in which each party has duties towards the other: to love and worship with the body, as the English marriage service had stated since the Middle Ages, to comfort each other in sickness, to share the responsibilities of providing for the family (which in many cases made women working partners), to bring up children in godly ways, to care for their health, education and welfare throughout the parents' lives and after their deaths, by the careful maintenance of land and property. And these injunctions were no idealising theory: as many studies have shown, marriage granted women far more power and status than some feminists care to acknowledge, and wives, mothers and daughters were just as much the object of love and nurturing as were husbands, fathers, and sons. Of course, many inequalities persisted, both in law and in social practice, but the overall picture was far less bleak than some historians would have it.

It is heartening to see that this much-needed corrective research is coming from women historians, too. Not only do we have the excellent studies by Linda Woodbridge, Kathleen Davies and Vivien Elliott, but a recent book by Margaret Ezell has undermined still more of Stone's thesis and demonstrated the proper historical approach.<sup>11</sup> Ezell proves Stone wrong in his contention that children were usually given in marriage by their father. For one thing, the high mortality rate meant that many children were left fatherless, so that wedding negotiations (where they took place, in the higher realms of English society) were carried out by the mothers, especially, sometimes aided by aunts or grandmothers (Ezell 1987, pp. 18–32). Even when the father was alive, women still played the major role in these matters, and many instances show that the children's wishes, too, were taken into account. In the children's education and careers it was not the case that the patriarch laid down the law with unbending rigidity: mothers also had their say, indeed Ezell emphasises that the responsibility in these matters was not so much patriarchal as parental (*ibid.*, pp. 13, 34–5, 161). From her survey of women's education we can also reject Stone's picture of women receiving a formal classical education only for a brief period in the sixteenth century, under the influence of humanism, from which, he claims, in the not yet enlightened seventeenth century they slipped back into 'feminine acquirements'. The fact is that many more women received education in the seventeenth century than ever before, in a wider range of schools (pp. 11–15). Ezell also does much

to dispel the false notion that the patriarchal oppression of women reduced them to silence both in the home and outside it, as seen by the scarcity of women authors. There was in fact a large literature by women (the better we research the subject the more we find),<sup>12</sup> much of it still extant in manuscript, as Ezell shows for the first time (pp. 62–100). Women's reluctance to venture into print can now be seen as deriving not from 'sexual intimidation' but from a clear decision to avoid the risk of being misunderstood and to select readers of their own choice (pp. 65–71, 85). This valuable study reinforces the case against Stone so tellingly made by Macfarlane, Wrightson and other critics, giving us a much more balanced picture of relationships between men and women. We can now accept the fact that women's competence was recognised in many areas of life, and that the success of marriage and parenthood was seen as depending not on some arbitrary male authority but on the mutual exchange of love, care, and nurturing. A leading feminist historian recently rebuked feminist critics for focussing on power but tending 'to homogenize its dynamics under the mindlessly simplistic category of "patriarchy"' (Fox-Genovese 1989, p. 237). That may be the signal for a welcome change of emphasis in women's studies.

For the great majority of feminist Shakespeare critics, however, blissfully unaware of the weakness of Stone's thesis, patriarchy continues to serve as a monolithic, reified bogey-man. In Charles Frey's reading of the great tragedies, *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, plays shot through with sexual and familial confusion, we see the inability of an authoritarian, aggressive male to enter reciprocal, fruitful relations with women or to foster life or line'. In the face of 'such often disastrous results generated by the system of near-absolute male authority', Frey can only conclude that 'Shakespeare's women are to some degree victims of patriarchy' (Frey 1980, p. 296). What we really see, however, is the distorting effect of this topic-determined approach, with its normative viewpoint or expectation that literary works — indeed, whole genres — can be reduced to the level of gender and still yield a meaningful statement. I dare say that no tragedy, by any writer, shows men entering into 'reciprocal, fruitful relations with women', or fostering life and line. But that is a necessary consequence of tragedy's concern with breakdown, and its presentation of the human evil that destroys almost everything and everyone we value in these plays. The genre is by definition committed to dramatising destruction, loss, waste. Ignoring this point, feminists make the further error of generalising the faults of specific characters, which involve a wide range of motivation — the mistaken love in *Lear* and Gloucester which displaces Cordelia and Edgar, empowering Goneril, Regan, and Edmund; Iago's hatred and brilliant manipulation of *Othello*, Desdemona, and almost everyone else in that play; Lady Macbeth's readiness to abandon human nature and social order to further her ambition, and her husband's inability to escape being manipulated by her — feminists generalise these diverse and individual

motives into some supposed characteristic of Shakespeare's society and of the attitudes he derived from it, or see them as the mark of 'men' or 'women', *tout court*.

The disappointing aspect of much feminist Shakespeare criticism so far is that it seldom analyses drama in a spirit of open enquiry. It uses highly selective reference to the plays to make a slanted interpretation of them, with the aim of attacking specific political targets: male behaviour, patriarchy, injustice to women — then as now. The editors of that anthology, *The Woman's Part*, predictably emphasise the presence of patriarchy in Shakespeare and describe it as 'oppressive':

Its lethal flaws are made manifest in the presentation of rape and attempted rape, in the . . . spurious manliness and empty honor that generate the tragedy of *Othello*. . . . Many other plays as well reveal the high cost of patriarchal values; the men who uphold them atrophy, and the women, whether resistant or acquiescent, die. . . . Cordelia . . . dies a victim of a chain of brutal assertions of manhood — Lear's, Edmund's, the Captain's. (Lenz *et al.* 1980, pp. 5–6)

Again the indictment of a generalised target distracts the attention from the specific actions within the play. Iago's hatred is the single generative factor in *Othello*, not manliness, nor honour; and Cordelia's death is due to a whole complex of desires — not excluding Goneril and Regan's cruelty and lust (their rivalry for Edmund consolidates his power at a crucial phase). As for rape, I trust that feminists will recognise the disgust with which Shakespeare presents that act, whether in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus*, or *Cymbeline*.<sup>13</sup>

One of the editors of this anthology, co-editor of a later one, writing in her own person, similarly affirmed that feminist critics 'find frequently an implied critique [that is, she suggests, in *Shakespeare*, by *Shakespeare*] of the values of patriarchy: of the aggressive individualism of an Edmund or Iago', or of the 'destructive effects' that 'patriarchal hierarchy' has on Desdemona, Othello, Coriolanus. Indeed, the whole genre of tragedy, it seems, is marked by this social system: 'lives are brought to tragic conclusions in these plays by the weight of a destructive patriarchy' (Greene 1981, pp. 30–31). We have been assured that feminism has no orthodoxy yet — but surely this is it! However, the reader concerned with the whole of Shakespeare must object that in his plays men and women are good or evil in themselves, not because of the social structure in which (supposedly) they find themselves. As an explanation of human behaviour this is rather like the reductivism and attempt to avoid responsibility which Shakespeare mocked, through the persona of Edmund, in judicial astrology: 'as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and traitors by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence' — and rapists, duellists and murderers by the overwhelming weight of patriarchy. The amount of

blurring and distortion created by this type of explanation is seen in Greene's identification of patriarchy with the 'aggressive individualism' of Edmund or Iago. In fact, the ruthless egoism of those two villains is actually hostile to, and subversive of, all forms of social order.

Another automatic, unthinking orthodoxy in current feminist circles is to equate patriarchy with misogyny. (I am aware that 'misogyny' is sometimes used loosely, to describe any system that under-privileges women, but from the contexts in which these critics use the term it seems to be meant literally.) Paula Berggren thinks that 'the central element in Shakespeare's treatment of women is always their sex, . . . primarily as a mythic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male' (Berggren 1980, p. 18). Where does this loathing come from? Janice Hays diagnoses a generalised 'sexual distrust of women' frequently expressed in Shakespeare (Hays 1980, pp. 79ff). Madelon Gohlke believes that 'violence against women as an aspect of the structure of male dominance in Shakespeare's plays' indicates a deeper conflict in which women in general, as lovers and mothers, are 'perceived as radically untrustworthy' (Gohlke 1980, p. 161). Linda Bamber finds misogyny frequent in Shakespeare, but conveniently explains it with the psychoanalytic theory of projection. The misogyny of Hamlet, Lear, Antony, and Othello, she writes, is a

projection onto women . . . of incoherence within the male. It is only when his sense of his own identity is threatened that the hero projects onto women what he refuses to acknowledge in himself. Only when he finds himself cowardly, appetitive, shifty, and disloyal does the sexuality of women disgust him. (Bamber 1986, p. 14)

In other words, 'misogyny and sex nausea' are born of what men find 'unacceptable in the male self — vicious, single-minded aggression' (pp. 15, 19). This is called, 'turning the tables'.

To some readers such arguments might be reassuring, perhaps even offering consolation that men are just as bad. But to me, critics who make such generalisations have simply ignored whole sections of the action, sequences of perfectly coherent causation which explain precisely why some men, sometimes, express resentment against women. In general, the diatribes against women are not, as elsewhere in drama and literature of the 'anti-feminist' tradition, the utterances of characters who can be identified as permanent misogynists, whether comic or vicious. In Shakespeare's men misogyny is (with two exceptions) a passing state, for which we see clear and adequate causes. The exceptions are, first, Timon of Athens, whose disappointment at the ingratitude of those he took to be friends, not parasites, becomes so obsessive that it deranges his feelings towards the whole of humanity. Timon becomes misogynistic *and* misanthropic. The same might be said of Iago, whose resentment of women (an irrational suspicion of Emilia constantly betraying him, which makes him well qualified to arouse similar fears in Othello) is equalled by his

dislike of men, apart from himself. All the other misogynistic phases that men go through in Shakespeare occur in response to real or imagined betrayals of love. Hamlet is disgusted by his mother's speedy and incestuous marriage, which shows how little she loved his father; and he also has reason to believe that Ophelia is being used as a decoy. True, his diatribe against women is unbalanced, his generalisations extreme, and he lapses into the stock postures of misogynist satire.<sup>14</sup> It is not always easy to be sure what Shakespeare intended in this play, given the many and perhaps irreconcilable aspects of Hamlet's character as he created it, and one may well feel, with T.S. Eliot, that Hamlet's emotion 'is in excess of the facts'. I for one would regard the disproportionate intensity of feeling as yet another sign of the play's failure to integrate character, motive, and action. But Hamlet does have a reason for the disappointment he expresses, it is not because he himself is 'appetitive' or 'disloyal'.

Troilus, too, has ample reason to feel bitter at Cressida betraying him with Diomedes. But his outburst, which also generalises about the whole of the female sex on the basis of this one disappointment — 'Let it not be believed for womanhood. / Think, we had mothers' — is instantly mocked. As we have seen in Chapter 3, Shakespeare has Ulysses standing by in order to expose this superficiality — 'What hath she done, prince, that can soil our mothers?' (5.2.129ff). Troilus' attempt 'to square the general sex / By Cressida's rule' is so patently ridiculous that it deserves to be put in the same category as those inherently meaningless generalisations that begin 'Men...' or 'Women...'; or 'Englishmen...' or 'Germans...'. One character in Shakespeare who launches an attack on women's infidelity will be seen later to have spoken the truth without knowing it, since it has yet to happen. King Lear's intuition about his hypocritical daughters' appetite — 'Down from the waist they are centaurs' — actually precedes the outbreak of lust and rivalry between his two elder daughters, but many people would agree that 'the promiscuity of Goneril and Regan is predictable from their self-selling in the opening scene of the play' (Dusinberre 1975, p. 63). Lear's disgust is proleptic, then, and what he describes does actually happen in the play.

All the other men who attack women do so in the mistaken belief that their love has been betrayed. Antony's anger with Cleopatra comes when he finds her apparently making a deal with Caesar's messenger, and being over-generous with her person. In *Much Ado* Claudio is gulled by Don John's plot into thinking that Hero has deceived him. Othello has been convinced by Iago of Desdemona's infidelity, he has his 'cause', deluded though it is. Similarly with Posthumus, gulled by Iachimo into believing that Imogen has been unfaithful. As for Leontes' jealousy, it is not fully motivated, deliberately so, in order to show it as a sudden and irrational collapse. With the exception of Othello, none of these mistaken beliefs of betrayal has any tragic outcome: they belong to the plot-world of comedy, a temporary mistaking that is cleared up once greater knowledge of the real

situation unfolds. In several cases the men's behaviour takes on some of the ridiculous forms that Woodbridge shows to be characteristic of the stage misogynist, who is typically a figure of ridicule or contempt (Woodbridge 1984, pp. 275–99). Leontes has something of the character of the stage-tyrant, whose outbursts do not really frighten. Indeed, when Paulina stands up to him he becomes a comic figure, a version of the hen-pecked husband ('Away with that audacious lady. . . / I charged thee that she should not come about me, / I knew she would': 2.3.42–131). The only character whose misogyny is caused by a jealousy wholly self-produced is Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Shakespeare gives him, appropriately, a number of ludicrous soliloquies: 'Heaven be praised for my jealousy!' (2.2.309); 'This 'tis to be married! This 'tis to have linen and buck-baskets!' (3.5.42ff); reaching the absurd degree of holding himself up as a type of foolishness — 'Let them say of me, as jealous as Ford, that searched a hollow walnut for his wife's leman' (4.2.161ff).

Ford is a character who fully bears out the conclusions of Linda Woodbridge, that 'many stage misogynists are basically comic figures' (Woodbridge 1984, p. 285), and Margaret Ezell, that they became figures of fun. Joseph Swetnam, whose *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Inconstant Women* (1615) is naively seen by Stone as typifying 'the "sharpening acrimony against women in general"', ended, as Ezell points out, as 'a buffoon villain in a play' called *Swetnam the Woman-hater* (1620), a treatment meted out to other embodiments of 'mean-spirited misogyny' (Ezell 1987, pp. 46–51). Equally ridiculous is Posthumus, whose misogynistic soliloquy oscillates between violence and impotence. He starts with the blanket indiscrimination of a Troilus or Timon — 'Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers? We are all bastards', a deduction of such illogic as to be patently ridiculous. He is satirised throughout, and appropriately concludes by reducing himself to the level of an ineffective satirist denouncing women: 'I'll write against them, / Detest them, curse them' (*Cymbeline*, 2.5.1–35). 'Get on with it' is all that we can say, dismissively. In these men jealousy, like misogyny, is a temporary sickness — 'thou hast some crotchets in thy head now', Mistress Ford says to her husband (2.1.154f); or, as Mistress Page tells her,

Why, woman, your husband is in his old lunes again. He . . . so rails against all married mankind; so curses all Eve's daughters, of what complexion soever; and so buffets himself on the forehead, crying 'peer out, peer out', that any madness I ever yet beheld, seemed but tameness . . . to this his distemper he is in now. (4.2.21f)

All these men resemble Leontes, of whom Paulina — a central spokes-woman and moral authority if ever there was one — says: 'These dangerous, unsafe lunes i'the King, beshrew them!' (2.2.30). Once they recover from their 'lunes' or periods of temporary madness (male menstruation?), they beg the woman's pardon for the wrongs their mistaking has created. Let



Ford speak for them all; translated as he is to the dignity of verse to match the seriousness of his utterance:

Pardon me, wife, henceforth do what thou wilt.  
I rather will suspect the sun with cold,  
Than thee with wantonness. (4.4.6ff)

The distemper has been cured.

Of course, the language used against women by a Lear or a Posthumus is degrading, deeply offensive: but we know that it is the language of a man in a state of violent passion, justified or not, and that it in no way presents a norm either for them or for Shakespeare's men in general. Many misogynists in Elizabethan drama, as Woodbridge has shown, turn woman-haters out of one unhappy experience. But, as she points out, 'the misogynist's credibility is continually undercut by his subjectivity and his habit of jumping to conclusions'. The dramatists unanimously establish 'the character type as discreditable by nature — no less suspect as a commentator than the braggadocio' (Woodbridge 1984, pp. 282–3), being linked to 'a related type, the slanderer' (p. 288). In Shakespeare the misogynist is more often the victim of a slanderer than a slanderer himself (a significant point), but his plays conform to the general pattern in which misogynists are discredited. In Shakespeare, as in other dramatists, the misogynist performs what Woodbridge calls 'an antimasque function', objectifying 'doubts, fears, and antagonisms' which can be thought to be banished when the misogynist is 'converted, discredited, or simply drops out of the play'. In effect the plays become 'almost ritual vindications of Woman' (p. 290), and so, she concludes, paradoxical though it may seem, that 'the stage misogynist is a figure belonging to the defense of women' (p. 297). This is certainly true when we think of the attacks of Leontes on Hermione, Enobarbus on Cleopatra, Claudio on Hero, Ford on his wife, Posthumus on Imogen, and — belatedly, as Othello himself realises, of Desdemona too. All these women are comprehensively vindicated from the misogynist attack. The example of Othello, suddenly and painfully realising whom he has destroyed —

My wife! My wife! What wife? I have no wife.  
O insupportable! O heavy hour!  
Methinks it should now be a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon. . . . (5.2.61ff)

— is the most painful proof of the rule that misogyny in Shakespeare is the result of mental imbalance, not a permanent state of the psyche which can only be eased by the phenomenon of 'projection'. The state is only temporary, for with the exception of Timon (permanently estranged from the whole of humankind) and Iago (liking nobody), it is noticeable that Hamlet shows no lasting resentment to either Ophelia or Gertrude, and

that all the others recover their love again, retaining it, in romance, losing it for ever in tragedy.

There is, we may conclude, not much misogyny in Shakespeare, and what there is derives from causal plot structures, not from diseased psyches. There is not much misogyny in the supposedly patriarchal Renaissance either, as Linda Woodbridge has conclusively shown. Her outstanding study of the controversy over women in England between 1540 and 1620 establishes that there were many more defences of women published than attacks on them; that the defences came first, as part of a formal, debate-like structure (she makes good use of contemporary practices in rhetoric); that the debate was more of a literary convention than a reflection of real life; and that it was possibly damaging to the actual cause of women, since it deflected attention away from real issues (financial and legal bondage) to literary *topoi* (pp. 134–5). Yet, as she observes, 'Renaissance attacks on women are more congenial to modern feminists than are Renaissance defenses of women' (p. 8). There is perhaps something of a rallying-point about the image of a hostile, oppressive enemy: it unites those threatened into a group, justifying their aggression as legitimate defence. As Woodbridge writes of the morality plays, 'the presence of the formal detractor, in the person of the Vice, is a structural and genetic necessity: the defense of women had always adopted a position of rebuttal; if a contemporary detractor did not exist, the formal defense had always found it necessary to invent one' (p. 278). The current enemy is the patriarchal society. But that, too, is an unhistorical modern illusion, a cultural construct.

Whoever approaches English social history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with an open mind will find ample evidence that women were not uniformly oppressed, but treated with respect, given status and power — albeit within boundaries — and were associated with such qualities as love, sharing, and nurturing. Those feminists who are aware of this historical fact but suppress it, preferring to see hatred, oppression, and violence, are distorting the real situation, whether or not for self-serving ends, and what they gain in the short term (a sense of unity in the face of oppression) they will lose as the true picture comes to be more widely known. Lynda E. Boose, for instance, who believes that 'misogyny . . . indelibly marks both the literary and non-literary texts of the English Renaissance' (Boose 1987, p. 712), defends feminists' use of psychoanalytic approaches, even though they accept 'Freud's essentialist presumption' of 'the transhistorical nature of the family unit' (pp. 715, 720) — that is, as retaining the same identity and behaviour-patterns at whatever point in history. Boose then faces the charge that such criticism is 'ahistorical' in 'its failure to recognize the historical specificity of psychic and social structures that produce gender and family' (p. 733). As we saw above, in reply she effectively dismissed history. Feminists rightly 'privilege' the literary work over its historical context, she claimed, because the work's

'ability to survive massive social changes and still fascinate a modern reader' (whether or not they have understood it!) means that to them

a historical text is seen as fully approachable through contemporary ideas — nor are those ideas assumed to be projections backward from the present. Even though a social idea may not have been articulated during the historical moment in which the text was produced, such ideas are imagined as being potentially fully present, latent within earlier times, but, like the late discovered planets, awaiting the invention of a telescope, a discourse, that could articulate them. (p. 734)

But the analogy is false: those planets have been there since the world began, while the 'psychic and social structures' of 1580, say, are the result of a whole complex of historical factors specific to that time (and indeed to each place), and totally different to those of 1780, or 1880. Lacking an open-minded approach to the past, such reading into the literary text of social ideas that may post-date it is indeed nothing other than a projection of our concerns 'backward from the present', a re-writing of the text in our terms which freezes it at this moment in time, detached from both past and future. In twenty years' time such criticism may seem archaic. For Boose, however, 'the feminist investment in history' is and should be 'not only minimal' but actively sceptical of the whole possibility of historical understanding, since 'Western history is essentially a transmitted record of upper class white males' (p. 735), a 'monological narrative of male-male conflict' (p. 737). After this absolute dismissal of the historical approach we are left with 'feminist analyses [grounded] inside the text' (p. 714). To some readers this will seem like a poor exchange.

### III

If we leave the historical issue and turn back to Shakespeare's plays, examining those forms of 'pure' criticism which disavow reconstructing a Renaissance or any other context, we find that several feminists pride themselves on their close scrutiny of the text. The editors of the first anthology of their work say that feminist critics reading Shakespeare 'trust their responses . . . even when they raise questions' that challenge prevailing assumptions, and that 'conclusions derived from these questions are then tested rigorously against the text'. All their contributors are said to 'owe a substantial debt to New Criticism. All use techniques of close textual analysis . . .' (Lenz *et al.* 1980, pp. 3, 10). But the dichotomy is misleading, for textual analysis is only convincing when it can claim to have understood the meaning of a text, and meaning is, to begin with, lexical, depending on the history of the language at that point in time, acquiring more specific contextual detail from the genre in which it occurs,

and the conventions of the work's literary form. In pastoral love-poetry or madrigals 'to die' is a euphemism for orgasm, but to find in Othello's last words as he kills himself ('No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss') an 'appalling pun', as Madelon Gohlke does (Gohlke 1981, p. 164), is to lose the literal in the metaphorical. In modern (especially American) slang 'grope' as a transitive verb without a preposition means something like making physical contact, sexually. To Linda Bamber Hamlet's description of how he searched the sleeping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for evidence of the death-sentence Claudius has given them — 'in the dark / Groped I to find out them, had my desire, / Fingered their packet' (5.12.13–15) — 'the language implies a heavy investment of libido in the action' (Bamber 1982, p. 90). But no, 'groped' here simply means 'fumbled around', looking for something, while 'fingered' means 'stole, extracted', as in that description of the kidnapping of Henry VI with a metaphor from card-games: 'The king was sliely finger'd from the deck' (3 *Henry VI*, 5.1.44). There are no sexual undertones here.

Other feminist critics reveal anachronistic aesthetic attitudes, derived from nineteenth-century naturalism, which make them insensitive to the theatrical context of Elizabethan drama, with its many conventions governing language, symbolism, and plot-forms. Commenting on the scene in *Richard III* (2.2) where the surviving relatives of the murdered Clarence and the dead King Edward express their griefs, Madonne M. Miner complains that the characters 'engage in a chorus of moans, each claiming the greater loss. An appalling absence of empathy characterizes this meeting . . . a selfish indulgence' (Miner 1980, p. 46). This is to judge from a disabblingly modern viewpoint, unaware of both dramatic purpose and the lament-form, which serves both to express the characters' grief and to arouse feeling in the audience. Janice Hays, discussing *Much Ado about Nothing*, finds it 'reasonable and even probable' that Claudio should ask Don Pedro to make a courtship approach on his behalf to Leonato, but observes disapprovingly that 'it does not at all follow that Don Pedro should disguise himself as Claudio, approach Hero, and woo her' (Hays 1980, pp. 83–4). She invokes Lawrence Stone and Freudian theories of 'latent content' shaping 'manifest presentation' to explain this: but she might simply have reflected that such behaviour is perfectly normal in an Elizabethan play. This lack of any sense of the dynamics of plot or dramatic structure also characterises David Sundelson's disapproval of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, whose concealment of his plot to save Claudio is described as a 'protracted torment' of Isabella. He lets her 'believe that her brother has been executed, and, as if that were not enough, accuses her of madness and drives her uncomfortably close to it by pretending not to believe her denunciation of the deputy' (Sundelson 1981, p. 87). Such comments ignore the logic of plot and treat characters in Elizabethan drama by the standards of contemporary psychological naturalism, as if to say, 'I'd never behave like that! What a nasty man! How inconsiderate!'

If plot and dramatic structure go by the board, so do theatre conventions. (It was a convention in the Elizabethan theatre for women's roles to be taken by boys (apart from some older comic female parts, played by men). The disguise involved was sometimes reversed, so to speak, in that the female characters subsequently adopted male disguise in order to fulfil their plots within the play, usually romantic, and usually involving a happy ending.) This curious A/B/A structure has been commented on in English literary criticism for centuries, but feminism, sometimes aided by psychoanalysis, wishes to give it a quite new significance. As we briefly saw with Greenblatt's ('Fiction and Friction') unsuccessful search for 'heat' in the comedies (theatrical disguise is being increasingly discussed in terms of transvestism ('cross-dressing') or even androgyny.) Both concepts seems to me glaringly anachronistic and inappropriate to what was a theatrical necessity, given the English ban on actresses. Outside the theatre transvestism is the action of sexually mature adults who feel unhappy with their biological destiny, sometimes wishing to attract attention from their own sex by posing as the other. The motivation behind it is complex, but it is a freely-chosen act, often with sexual consequences; for a boy-actor, apprenticed to the company and likely to stay with it once his voice had broken, it did not have these connotations.

Although unsuitable as descriptions of boy-actors, both notions obviously appeal to the current fascination with gender. Transvestism is an instance of 'gender-swapping' that can be taken to show either male anxieties with their biological sex, or women's wishes to overturn the cultural category of gender; androgyny is a crossing of categories for the boy-actor, who — for the duration of the play, at least — is supposedly both male and female. The direction this second concern can take is shown by recent studies which see the characters of Portia, Rosalind and Viola, played by male actors, as representing to Shakespeare's audience 'celebrations of an idealized androgyny unavailable in real life'. However few spectators then, or now, aspire towards the androgynous condition, the vogue for essays, and soon books, on cross-dressing since the 1970s has been astonishing, making it the 'fastest-growth area' in Renaissance drama studies. Some of this work is historically well-founded (that by Linda Woodbridge exceptionally so), some not; some of it preserves a sense of the plays as drama, 'doings' which have distinct and differing structures; some of it ignores all aesthetic considerations and picks out only those elements fitting current feminist preoccupations. I shall cite one critic who preserves the notion of structure, another who destroys it, beginning with the second.

Jean Howard's essay on 'Crossdressing . . . and Gender Struggle' draws eclectically on several current routines: first, New Historicism (her readings 'are motivated by present concerns', she states, citing Montrose in support: Howard 1988, p. 418 note), with its Foucauldian concern for 'sites of resistance to the period's patriarchal sex-gender system' (pp. 419, 439);

secondly on 'Materialist or socialist feminism' (p. 419 note); and thirdly — and inescapably — on psychoanalytic criticism (in *Twelfth Night* Orsino's 'narcissism and potential effeminacy are displaced, respectively, onto Malvolio and Andrew Aguecheek': p. 432). I pick out, for brevity's sake, her account of *Twelfth Night*, a play in which some feminists take Viola as representing what they call androgyny, 'the erasure of sexual determinacy' (pp. 430–33). Howard in fact disagrees with feminists who see such 'blurring of sexual difference' as offering 'the liberating possibility of undoing all the structures of domination and exploitation' involved in a binary sexual system. She believes that Viola's gender identity is never 'made indeterminate and thereby . . . threatening to the theatre audience' (a diametrically opposed reading to those who see androgyny as a blessed transformation!), since the audience never doubts her heterosexual orientation, what Howard tendentiously labels 'her properly "feminine" subjectivity'. Viola, that is, does not attempt 'a dismantling of a hierarchical gender system', and her 'self-abnegation' thus makes her acceptable to men. While making sense within one current feminist paradigm, Howard's categorisation reduces Viola to a bleached, rather passive role, far removed from what we perceive as an active presence in the play, a woman who can turn many situations to her own advantage, that side of her caught so well in Johnson's laconic note: 'Viola is an excellent schemer, never at a loss'.<sup>15</sup> To Howard the play as a whole 'seems to . . . embody a fairly oppressive fable of the containment of gender and class insurgency and the valorization of the "good woman" as the one who has interiorized' her 'subordinate relations to the male'. That is a dispiriting example of how gender criticism can drain life and movement from a play.

Howard's paradigm has a much stranger effect on Olivia, whom she regards as 'the real threat to the hierarchical gender system in this text'. Joining hands with Stephen ('Fiction and Friction') Greenblatt, Howard agrees that 'Olivia is a woman of property, headstrong and initially intractable', who 'lacks any discernible male relatives, except the disreputable Toby, to control her and her fortune'. This is apparently a suspicious degree of independence, and another fact to be held against her is that 'at the beginning of the play she has decided to do without the world of men, and especially to do without Orsino. These are classic marks of unruliness', Howard deduces, and thus Olivia 'is punished, comically but unmistakably, by being made to fall in love with the crossdressed Viola'. The 'humiliation' of Olivia — by 'the play', Howard says, not by Shakespeare — is appropriate for a woman who has 'jumped gender boundaries to assume control of her house and person and refused her "natural" role in the patriarchal marriage market'. Viola is the agent of this humiliation, and is thus 'used to enforce a gender system'; while at the same time 'the oft-repeated fear that boy actors dressed as women leads to sodomy is displaced here upon a woman dressed as a man'. (I confess not to understand this point: what is 'displaced' on to Viola, and how can there

be any 'fear of sodomy' if a woman falls in love with her? In any case, the fact that some hysterical moralist like Stubbes invoked sodomy to attack theatrical disguise proves nothing about general attitudes.)<sup>16</sup>

Imposing a modern gender-paradigm on *Twelfth Night* simply applies normative expectations to it from a distance of four centuries, distorting the play until it fits the present-day paradigm. Howard never mentions that, at the beginning of the play, Olivia has vowed to mourn seven years to 'keep fresh . . . / A brother's dead love' (1.1.29f), the brother who had presumably been in charge of their household. Olivia has not 'jumped gender boundaries to assume control of her house': she has inherited it, and is no doubt capable of managing it, as many Elizabethan women (usually widows) did, given reliable help from their steward and others. As Sebastian records, baffled by the sudden 'flood of fortune' that overwhelms him with Olivia's proposal to marry him virtually at first sight (as far as he is concerned, at least), she cannot be mad, for if she were

She could not sway her house, command her followers,  
Take and give back affairs and their dispatch  
With such a smooth, discreet, and stable bearing  
As I perceive she does. (4.3.11ff)

In her mourning Olivia has rejected not 'the world of men', as Howard claims, but the world in general; or if not that, Orsino, whom she does not like (but then, apart from Viola, not many people do). Howard's description of Olivia as 'headstrong . . . intractable', having 'refused her "natural" role in the patriarchal marriage market', is presumably intended to spell out (and parody) male chauvinist attitudes. In our theatrical experience, reading or seeing the play, Olivia becomes a comic figure when she falls in love with Cesario-Viola — so does Viola — but any notion that 'the play' (once again detached from Shakespeare's authorship) intends this to be seen as a *punishment* for challenging the patriarchal order is a figment of this critic's imagination ('classic marks of unruliness' is a fine invention). The Elizabethan property-owning woman was self-reliant to a degree that modern feminists of the incriminatory school evidently find it uncomfortable to admit. Following her ideological bias, Howard concludes that the play 'disciplines independent women like Olivia', not noticing that it (or rather Shakespeare) actually rewards her with Sebastian — 'Would thou'dst be ruled by me!', she says to him (4.1.63), and he gladly agrees. It is symptomatic of Howard's involvement with the 'gender struggle' that she never even mentions Sebastian, nor the comic resolution of the play in marriage, precisely those points that would have undermined her thesis. The play's ingenious structure, its beautifully articulated development of disguise and deception leading to cross purposes and comic misunderstanding as a means of exposing character and false values — think of Malvolio, and the reversals in the duel-scene involving Toby, Aguecheek and Sebastian — all this disappears from view.

Feminist criticism need not be so reductive and blind to drama as a highly-organised structure and a complex unfolding experience. This can be seen from an essay by Nancy K. Hayles on sexual disguise in the comedies, from which I select the discussion of *As You Like It* (Hayles 1979, pp. 63–8). Criticising the tendency to regard 'this complex dramatic device . . . solely in terms of social and sexual roles', Hayles urges that while some aspects of disguise are 'common to all the plays in which it appears, its dramatic function is shaped by the particular design of each play'. In *As You Like It*, she suggests, disguise proceeds in two separate movements: first, 'layers of disguise are added as Rosalind becomes Ganymede, and then as Ganymede pretends to be Orlando's Rosalind' — the unique extra level of pretence in this play; secondly, 'the layers are removed as Ganymede abandons the play-acting of Rosalind, and then as Rosalind herself abandons the disguise of Ganymede'. In the 'most complex layering, Rosalind-as-Ganymede-as-Orlando's Rosalind', Hayles points out, the heroine persuades her beloved to accept a more realistic version of herself than the Petrarchised idol of his love-verses. 'When Rosalind-as-Ganymede insists that Orlando's Rosalind will have her own wit, her own will and her own way', Rosalind is in effect insisting that Orlando confront the discrepancy between his idealised expectations and her needs, so 'claiming the right to be herself'. As Hayles finely puts it,

In playing herself (which she can apparently do only if she first plays someone else) Rosalind is able to state her own needs in a way she could not if she were simply herself. It is because she is disguised as Ganymede that she can be so free in portraying a Rosalind who is a flesh and blood woman instead of a Petrarchan abstraction.

That sensitive observation, made by attending to the language of the play as it reveals feelings and motives, is at a far remove from the imposition of gender paradigms.

Hayles is also responsive to the dramatic structure, as two plot-levels become intertwined when Rosalind's male disguise makes Phebe fall in love with Ganymede.

Rosalind's on-layering, which inadvertently makes her Silvius's rival, causes Phebe's desire to be even more at variance with Silvius's hopes than before. It takes Ganymede's transformation into Rosalind to trick Phebe into accepting her swain, as the off-layering of Rosalind's disguise reconciles these two Petrarchan lovers.

Hayles links the two stages of disguise to the general movement of this comedy, from conflict and competition (the exile by Duke Frederick of his brother, the rightful Duke; the mistreatment of Orlando by his brother Oliver) to reconciliation and co-operation. The Silvius-Phebe plot 'shows in simplified form the correlation between on-layering and rivalry, and off-layering and co-operation'. It also allows us to see a resemblance between

the two pairs of lovers as 'reflections of stereotypical male and female postures, familiar through the long tradition of courtly love'. Hayles suggests that Rosalind's disguise, inasmuch as it allows her 'to hear Orlando's love-confession without having to take any comparable risks herself', gives her a superiority over him which is another instance of 'female manipulation', also caricatured in Phebe. If so, the superiority is shortlived, for — I suggest — just as in *Twelfth Night*, when Shakespeare engineered the comic duel with Aguecheek to deflate some of the advantages that Viola has gained through disguise, so here, when Rosalind hears from Oliver of Orlando's fight with the lioness, she faints. Within the play's conventions, Hayles argues, this is 'an involuntary revelation of female gender because fainting is a "feminine" response', but it also represents 'the loss of her manipulative control over Orlando'.

Rosalind regains self-control, and with it her disguise, but when she next meets Orlando she realises that the pretence is no longer needed. 'From this point on, the removal of the disguise signals the consummation of all the relationships as all four couples are married'. Hayles sees much of the play, including the disguising, in terms of 'control', however, which seems to me to miss the point. I see disguise as a way of gaining an (often unfair) advantage over other people, so that Rosalind's abandonment of disguise puts her back on the same level as Orlando, acknowledging his rights and needs as well as her own. But I agree with Hayles that the removal of disguise is 'an act of renunciation', and that (as with Portia's gift of herself to Bassanio)

what appears to be a generous surrendering of self-interest can in fact bring consummation both to man and woman, so that rivalry can be transcended as co-operation brings fulfillment. In *As You Like It*, fulfillment of desire, contentment and peace of mind come when the insistence on self-satisfaction ceases.

As Hayles shows, the several events in the closing stages of the play bringing about reconciliation 'all express the same paradox of consummation through renunciation that is realized in specifically sexual terms by the disguise'. (What a refreshingly sane and coherent account of the play's resolution this is compared to Malcolm Evans's Derridian fissurising, discussed in Chapter 3.)

Yet there is one more level of disguise to be removed in *As You Like It*. In the Epilogue Rosalind addresses the audience, first charging the women 'for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you', and then charging the men 'for the love you bear to women' with the same task. 'If I were a woman', the actor adds, 'I would kiss as many of' the men as she liked, and hopes that they all 'will for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell'. At this moment, Hayles writes, the boy actor 'relinquishes the last level of the sexual disguise', the 'unlayering' being once more 'linked with a reconciliation between the sexes' as he appeals

to each in turn. Through the figure of Rosalind, who has been mistress of ceremonies in the closing scenes, a 'surrogate playmaker', Shakespeare 'uses his relinquishing of control over the play to signal a final reconciliation between the men and women in the audience'. There Nancy Hayles neatly indicates the multiple connections between playwright and actors, playwright and audience, actors and audience, and the whole structure of make-believe in which we have been participating, a dramatic experience unfolding simultaneously on several interconnected levels and involving us in the hopes and fears of many characters and their resolution, successful or otherwise.

Such sensitivity to the relation of characters' intentionalities to the play as a whole is rare in feminist criticism (and not only there, I should add in all fairness). Far too many feminist analyses of Shakespeare consist of character studies, often one at a time, with moralising judgements from a superior modern viewpoint. So Diane Elizabeth Dreher passes her verdict on Shylock's daughter: 'Bored, restless, and superficial, eager for the acceptance of her peers and resentful of her father, Jessica is a typical adolescent. She embodies the worst qualities of youth without its fervent idealism' (Dreher 1986, p. 102). Such a comment is not merely modern and anachronistic, it shows the danger of ignoring the specific identity of this character in this situation (there is only one Shylock), in order to generalise about supposedly typical behaviour-patterns. Feminism has a tendency to see everything in terms of family-structures, inevitably distorting or falsifying the play as a result. Dreher makes many such generalisations:

Research has correlated schizophrenic young women with rigid, authoritarian fathers who refuse to acknowledge their daughters' autonomy. Such is the relationship of Polonius with Ophelia, who, understandably, goes mad. (p. 12)

This glib comment overlooks, first, Ophelia's rejection by Hamlet; and secondly, the fact that it is not life with her father that drives Ophelia mad but the shock of his death, also caused by Hamlet. Dreher leaves out the unhappy love affair, because her Freudian-feminist alignment leads everything back to parent-child relationships. So, she adds, 'Shakespeare's fatherless daughters' — but one should not cite such remarks without noting the tendentious assumptions of this critical school that such 'omissions', like that of Shakespeare having 'failed to provide a wife' for Lear or Prospero, or sufficient mothers elsewhere, are somehow significant: if every character had to be fitted out with the standard allocation of spouses, parents, and/or children, the casts of these plays would be immense — such fatherless daughters as Olivia in *Twelfth Night* are, therefore, 'defensive and hesitant to commit themselves to men. Olivia hides behind her veil . . .' (p. 13). But only because she doesn't give a fig for Orsino! When Cesario comes along she is anything but hesitant, indeed marries

Sebastian with what seems to many theatregoers and readers like comical haste.

Such elementary misreadings of the play are not due to the lack of a historical perspective: but they are endemic to the whole feminist enterprise of locating 'the woman's part' and judging from there. A non-historical critical reading of Elizabethan drama is valid at any time provided that it respects what I take to be the fundamental, if often unstated principle of literary criticism dealing with a mimetic work of literature, that one should accurately and faithfully describe what happens in it, and why. (We require other things of the critic too, of course, but this one is essential.) Paula Berggren criticises Posthumus for 'his show-stopping theatrics' when he strikes 'the disguised Imogen' who is 'so bold as to answer his cry by identifying herself' (Berggren 1980, p. 28). But since he has every reason to believe that Imogen is dead, there is no way that Posthumus can identify her with this person in a page's clothing. Berggren's real target is 'self-indulgent' men, and she mocks the 'egotistical humility' of Posthumus, his 'colossal self-absorption'; to be fair, she might have commented on his anguish and self-accusation, too. Berggren states that disguise 'remains incidental, though useful, for Shakespeare's women; for his men, it is the very core of experience' (p. 20). But this superficial and hostile generalisation leaves out the fact that most of the men who use disguise and dissimulation do so for evil and destructive purposes, such as Richard III, whom she cites. In Shakespeare women disguise to achieve their (usually romantic) goals, because the plot-situation, or society, offer them no alternative. Hamlet's feigned madness is just such a protective disguise, but with male characters otherwise there is an alternative to disguise, namely open and honest behaviour. Berggren uses *King Lear* to show what she describes as 'the Manichean view of female sensuality in Shakespeare's high tragic world': that is, in 1.1 Lear offers his daughters 'plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads', while in 1.4 he 'reverses his promise to Goneril and Regan, bidding Nature' instead "dry up [their] organs of increase". They consequently manifest [a] depraved and nonprocreative lasciviousness' (p. 24). Something, indeed, happens between those two points, but readers will not need me to summarise the plot there. I just express disappointment at this kind of superficial man-nailing, a *ressentiment* that does not fulfil even the minimal requirements for literary criticism.

Feminist critics, like everyone else, tend to overlook or reject the things that displease them. Lisa Jardine cannot accept the absolute gift of the self that Portia makes to Bassanio:

Myself and what is mine to you and yours  
Is now converted. But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,

This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring. . . .

(3.2.149-72)

For Jardine it is 'a financial balance sheet' that 'simply will not balance', for Portia has 'rhetorically contrived' her 'capitulation' (Jardine 1983, p. 61). To me it reads like a spontaneous and convincing gesture, all of a piece with her feelings and values as we have known them since the beginning of the play. Must I qualify these words by adding 'but then, I write as a man', as if my sex were congenitally used to women offering themselves to us, since we are incapable of giving ourselves to them? That would be a submission gesture, admitting defeat or appeasing a victorious enemy (in the animal kingdom, at least). But this is precisely what feminists, in another new orthodoxy, accuse the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies of doing: 'even the strongest, most resourceful of the heroines end their comedies with ritual gestures of submission' (Novy 1981, p. 20; Park 1980, pp. 106ff). The words of Rosalind, Beatrice, and Portia are cited: but not those of Orlando, Benedick, and Bassanio. Yet this is to put the whole issue in a negative light. Each of those heroines wants her man, gives herself and receives him in turn. To leave out the women's desires, on the description and fulfilment of which Shakespeare lavishes a great part of his energies in comedy, is to lessen the plays, and falsify them.

#### IV

The most damaging effect of these partial, distorted readings concerns ethical issues, where the feminist displacement of interest towards the family leads to them omitting or ignoring crucial acts of evil and destructive behaviour, from both men and women. One feminist has fairly criticised Linda Bamber and Marilyn French for making an 'essentialist' definition of male (evil) and female (good) principles — 'the ability to kill' being set against 'the power to nurture and give birth' — independent both of historical particularity and the effects of genre and literary tradition.<sup>17</sup> This is a valuable comment on the tendency to reduce complex issues to their simplest binary opposition (as if we were to evaluate the food we eat in terms of the proportion of hydrogen and carbon molecules it contains). Unfortunately, however, this critic herself goes on to describe *King Lear* as linking 'sexual subordination and anarchy' but with 'an explicitly misogynist emphasis', namely the idea that 'fathers are owed particular duties by their daughters' (McLuskie 1985, p. 98). But parents also had their duties, according to Renaissance social theory, and the expectation of 'filial gratitude', as she calls it (p. 104), applied just as much to sons — even to

bastard sons, when legally recognised — as to daughters. It is significant of her one-sided approach that she never mentions Edmund, who not only betrays his natural father but whose destructive involvement in a sexual triangle with Goneril and Regan shows that 'atavistic selfishness and the monstrous assertion of individual wills' — which she fears would become the image of 'feminist ideology' if those two daughters' rights were to be asserted (p. 102) — is just as much a mark of the male sex, when external legal or moral constraints are abandoned.

The focus on gender issues regularly distorts issues of ethics and motivation. Janice Hays, discussing *Much Ado* and the Distrust of Women, believes that 'Shakespeare's purpose in the Hero-Claudio plot is . . . to confront the psychological difficulties of joining the traditional arranged marriage, which takes into account social and economic reality, with romantic and erotic love' (Hays 1980, p. 81). But Claudio has no qualms about the choice of Hero or the arrangements for the marriage. It is only when the malice of Don John produces the false disguise plot, where Claudio is led to believe that his intended has been having nocturnal assignations with another man, that the marriage arrangements break down. Hays explains Claudio's behaviour with a mixture of Lawrence Stone and Freud, to which I shall return. As for Don John's evil, Hays describes him as planting 'the seeds of distrust in Claudio's mind' (in fact he gives him 'ocular proof'), but doing so merely 'by externalizing unconscious aspects of Claudio's psyche' (p. 84). The real cause of the discord, then, is the psycho-social structure. A similar formulation by Diane Dreher links the heroines of comedy and tragedy: 'Ophelia, Hero, and Desdemona are victimized by the traditional power structure that identifies women exclusively as child-bearers, insisting on a rigid model of chastity to ensure the continuity of pure patrilineal succession' (Dreher 1986, p. 76). Readers who stop to wonder what child-bearing and chastity have to do with those three women soon realise that the critic's target is not the play but the 'power structure' supposedly behind it. Shakespeare becomes a tool in the indictment of the family, source of our present discontents.

The displacement of attention away from ethical issues sometimes takes the form of reinstating female characters and indicting males. Madelon Gohlke's description of Hamlet would shift the whole focus of the play: 'obsessed as he is with sexual betrayal, the problem of revenge for him is less a matter of killing Claudius than one of not killing his mother' (Gohlke 1980, p. 153) — so critics have been wrong for centuries concerning Hamlet's real motives. But rather than simply ascribing a generalised 'anger against women' to him, we ought to remind ourselves that his mother has betrayed her dead husband with what she herself describes as an 'o'er-hasty' (not to mention incestuous) marriage. To Rebecca Smith, though, Gertrude is a character to be exculpated from the traditional charges of vanity and lust, being only 'a soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman' (Smith 1980, p. 194), 'merely a quiet, biddable,

careful mother and wife' (p. 201). Smith finally approaches the issue of Gertrude's 'hasty, *apparently casual* betrayal of the memory of her first husband' (p. 202; my italics), and comments:

Although Gertrude is not an adulterer, she has been 'adulterated' by her contact, even innocently in marriage, with Claudius. Similarly, his crimes and deceit have, in fact, made Gertrude guilty of incest. In order to marry, Claudius and Gertrude would have been required to obtain a dispensation to counteract their canonical consanguinity or affinity. Obviously, if his crime of fratricide were publicly known . . .

permission would not have been granted. The Ghost and Hamlet know of the fratricide, and 'persist in terming the relationship incestuous [as well they might!]; but Gertrude has married in innocence and good faith, not as a party to the deception' (p. 203). But the issue of fratricide is irrelevant here: by the standards of Elizabethan society Gertrude has committed incest, and in haste, and that is enough to explain Hamlet's anger. The desire to exculpate Gertrude can result in her being described as 'morally neutral' (Bamber 1982, p. 77), but her acceptance of Claudius results in her becoming the instrument of his evil, and ultimately its victim. To describe her, as Smith does, as 'a compliant . . . woman whose only concern is pleasing others' (Smith 1980, p. 207) locates precisely the weakness that the critic is attempting to excuse.

I feel sympathy for Gertrude, just as I feel pity (at the end) for Lady Macbeth, but to attempt to screen them out of the play's moral system is to confuse sympathy and understanding. It is, of course, much more damaging to whitewash Lady Macbeth, but some feminists do so. Paula Berggren says that when we see her in the sleep-walking scene 'she is caught in the web that cripples women in a paternalistic society'; and, furthermore, 'is doomed to frustration in any case, for the husband who is neither father nor lover is beyond helping her' (Berggren 1980, p. 27). The significance of Macbeth not being her father and not helping her is unclear to me, if the 'paternalistic society' is to blame. For Madelon Gohlke once again, the husband is to blame:

The world constructed by Macbeth attempts to deny not only the values of trust and hospitality, perceived as essentially feminine, but to eradicate femininity itself. Macbeth reads power in terms of a masculine mystique that has no room for maternal values. . . . To be born of woman, as he reads the witches' prophecy, is to be mortal. (Gohlke 1980, p. 158)

Almost everything there is wrong. The values of 'trust and hospitality' are in fact urged, painfully and from deep within his social and moral being, by Macbeth himself, and ruthlessly thrust aside by his wife. She it is who wishes to 'eradicate femininity'; she it is who despises 'maternal values'. And to be born of woman is indeed to be mortal — an absurd comment,

made by taking the highly specific feature of Macduff's birth by Caesarian section and generalising it to a statement about men and women.

Joan Larsen Klein approves Lady Macbeth in her madness for being unable to deny her links with womankind — 'unlike her husband' (Klein 1980,<sup>18</sup> p. 241): but has this critic never read the final scenes of the play, with Macbeth's devastated sense of futility and non-existence? For Klein, too, an element in the tragedy is the couple's 'badly founded marriage' (p. 243). After such apologies it is good to read Linda Bamber's comment on Lady Macbeth's 'gratuitous fantasy of infanticide' in the speech 'I have given suck . . .' (1.7.54ff):

Lady Macbeth's murderous ambition is more horrible than her husband's because a woman, as this speech reminds us, should represent nurture and human connectedness. Lady Macbeth is not entirely a monster; she does refrain from stabbing Duncan herself, and her moral feelings ultimately do assert themselves in her madness. But to argue for a redistribution of sympathy in *Macbeth*, as some feminists have done,<sup>19</sup> is a pretty desperate measure. (Bamber 1982, pp. 2–3)

And to indict the paternalistic or masculine world is equally desperate. Shakespeare's real interest in the tragedies is in these human beings in these situations, and the desires or principles that move them towards, or away from, the destructive elements in our behaviour: "ruthlessness, callousness, power, lust, domineering self-assertion".<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

Of all the distortions of an ethical structure made by feminist Shakespeare critics, the most damaging (to my mind at least) concerns *Othello*, and the role in it of Iago, who is not so much exculpated (he is a man, after all), as ignored. Having seen (in Chapter 1) how Iago's intentionality perverts all forms of human intercourse in order to fulfil his destructive wishes, and having followed (in Chapter 2) some of the ways in which Shakespeare adapted his source-material in order to make the play's action turn, time and again, around Iago's plots and fantasies, it is rather unnerving to find him virtually screened out of the play. '*Hamlet* without the prince' is an expression describing the absurd situation of a structure lacking a vital element that has passed into the language (although it did once happen).<sup>21</sup> '*Othello* without Iago' would be equally absurd. To ignore this agent of chaos is to falsify the play beyond recovery; yet some feminists do so. According to Berggren, Desdemona's tragedy illustrates the way in which tragic heroines 'must be desexualized' (Berggren 1980, p. 24): her summary of the play omits any mention of Iago. Marianne Novy, also generalising about tragic heroines, finds in Desdemona a typically Shakespearian mixture of assertiveness and submissiveness which is apparently sufficient in itself to bring about her catastrophe: 'she has put herself in the vulnerable

position in which Othello can kill her' (Novy 1981, p. 21). Truly, to pick out 'the woman's part' can be a curiously myopic process, what J.H. Hexter has described as 'tunnel history', pursuing one track, blind to all the rest.<sup>22</sup> Marilyn L. Williamson also sees *Othello* in terms of Desdemona's pattern of assertiveness and submission, contrasted with Emilia (Williamson 1981, pp. 112–15), and also finds it unnecessary to mention Iago's plotting. Diane Elizabeth Dreher meditates at some length on this play (Dreher 1986, pp. 88–95), in a mixture of feminist and psychoanalytical criticism which succeeds in leaving Iago out of the reckoning and locates the cause of the tragedy within Othello and Desdemona, both in their psyches and in their social roles (since the latter determine the former):

Both Othello and Desdemona err in conforming to traditional male and female stereotypes, adopting personal behavior which prevents real intimacy and trust. Desdemona's chastity becomes more important to both of them than Desdemona herself. Othello kills her and she sacrifices herself to affirm the traditional ideal. . . . In the world of traditional male-female roles, males act and females react. (Dreher 1986, pp. 93–4)

Had Shakespeare's society been different, ergo, there would have been no need to write *Othello*.

Madelon Gohlke does notice the presence of Iago, but characteristically deflects interest away from him as a source of evil to a favourite feminist concern, namely 'Shakespeare's exploration . . . of male sexual anxiety' (Gohlke 1981, p. 158). Her exploration of the play begins so late as to disqualify itself as a coherent study, namely at Iago's statement to Othello, when he has wholly manipulated and dominated him: 'I am your own forever' (3.3.476). This sentence, she suggests, can mean Iago's acceptance of 'Othello's naming him his lieutenant'; but it can also mean that Iago 'devotes himself entirely to his master', and thus 'uses the language not only of fealty, but of love. His desire, it seems, is to be possessed by' Othello (p. 158). Having made this stunningly literal reading, she finds it 'consonant with a psychoanalytical view of' Iago — a compound, we are told, of 'sadism and homosexuality' (p. 173, n. 3) — although it disagrees with the first meaning, so she offers to reconcile the two. But a third possibility has been crushingly obvious to anyone attending to the first 60 lines of the play, namely that Iago explicitly declares that he always serves himself, that his 'following' Othello is but 'seeming', that his 'outward action' never demonstrates the 'native act and figure of my heart'; 'I am not what I am' (1.1.56–62). In other words, any statement of love that he makes must be read as hatred, and a desire to destroy, for as he tells us several times, 'I hate the Moor' (1.3.386). Gohlke actually quotes the first of these statements (p. 159), but interprets it in bizarre psychological terms: 'To be revealed is to be victimized. For Iago, direct statements of feeling or intent leave him open to injury or attack', so he 'adopts the strategy of the liar' (p. 159) — as if he had some unusually tender psyche.



Gohlke's motive for ignoring the issues of evil, malice, destructiveness and dissimulation is that she wishes to explain Iago's self-concealment as a mark of what she calls 'femininity', which characterises — paradoxically! — not only Desdemona (pp. 164–8) but all the *heroes* in Shakespeare's tragedies, who all, apparently, experience 'male sexual anxiety', 'fears' of heterosexual relationships, 'profound ambivalence in the sexual sphere', manifested as a 'resistance . . . to heterosexual bonding'. The tragic hero, 'like Iago . . . assumes that to be vulnerable is to be weak, exposed, even feminine, and it is the feminine posture, above all, which he fears' (pp. 169–71; my italics). Yet the tragic hero, in the end, loses his 'facade of masculinity', and 'finds himself in the typically feminine posture of telling the truth through lies' (p. 172). Other readers must make what they can of this essay, which seems to me irredeemably confused, but it certainly shifts the emphasis away from the ethics of the tragedy to the issue of gender, however vaguely defined.

Carol Thomas Neely is more straightforward, though equally biased against men. She distinguishes three schools of criticism concerning *Othello*. There are 'Othello critics', who sympathise with the hero 'and, like him, are overwhelmed by Iago's diabolism'; also like Othello, 'they do not always argue rationally or rigorously' (which, lacking any specific citation, would be described in boxing circles as a low blow). Then there are 'Iago critics', who admire the villain's realism and dislike Othello, devaluing his love (Neely 1980, pp. 211–12). Both schools 'badly misunderstand and misrepresent the women in the play', the first group idealising Desdemona but turning her into 'an object', the second group demeaning her. Both schools neglect Emilia and Bianca, too. Neely offers to 'show that the play's central theme is love — especially marital love; its central conflict is between *the men* and *the women*' (p. 212; my italics). The character who 'most explicitly speaks of this theme' is Emilia, who is 'dramatically and symbolically the play's fulcrum',<sup>23</sup> and so Neely constitutes a third school, declaring herself 'an Emilia critic' (p. 213). No objection, the reader thinks, until we see that this shift of focus again minimises Iago, virtually writes him out of the play. Neely briefly judges Act II 'a repetition of Act I', without having discussed either. In her summary 'Iago plots the remainder of the play, but his scheme is slight, repetitive, and flawed' (p. 124). But no, it is tremendous, hypnotic, and totally successful! Neely's fastidious aesthetic judgements seem to prevent her from actually noticing what happens in the play. Admitting the play's 'increasing intensity', she still finds 'little actual plot development', ignoring Iago's gradual but total undermining of Othello's trust in Desdemona and even in his own perception, comparing Iago rather disparagingly with Rosalind: 'Iago works to induce fantasy, and Rosalind to dispel it. Neither entirely succeeds. [*Come again?*] Iago's plot, like those of the comedies, rests on coincidence and absurdity. The handkerchief is . . . trivial and ridiculous but symbolically all-important' (p. 214). But no, again, the handkerchief is an agent of

plot, where it fulfils the functions expected of it, as I have shown, both to inculcate Desdemona in Othello's demented eyes, and subsequently to prove Iago's guilt, when Emilia reveals how they have all been deceived.

Iago and his 'absurd' plot out of the way, Neely can now focus on the play's real theme, 'the opposition of attitudes, viewpoints, and sexes'. She does so by an extraordinary reiteration of the opposition (to which my italics have called attention) between 'the men' and 'the women', or 'masculinity and femininity' in Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies (these terms recur, for instance, 19 times on p. 215 alone). 'The men' in *Othello* 'are, in Emilia's words, "murderous coxcombs". Three out of the five attempt murder' (p. 216) — as if this were somehow the consequence of them being men (no mention of Iago's destructive manipulations). The whole sex has a moral failing: 'vanity is the central characteristics of coxcombs and is at the root of the men's murderousness in *Othello*' (p. 221). The other sex, needless to say, sets a much better example: 'The women in *Othello* are not murderous, and they are not foolishly idealistic or foolishly cynical as the men are' (p. 218). Bianca's 'active, open-eyed, enduring affection' is superior to Cassio's 'indifference, to Roderigo's passivity, and to Othello's naïveté' (pp. 218–19). Emilia, as we might expect by now, 'articulates the balanced view': 'her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and between those of the women and those of the men' (p. 219). And so the critic goes on, elevating one sex and damning the other: 'the men's vanity, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are of love. The women, in contrast . . .' (p. 224).

Iago's supreme plotting, his total control over Othello's view of past and present (Iago is the 'catalyst'. Neely writes, of 'Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation . . . but Othello makes the task easy': p. 216), Othello's vulnerability as an outsider, Cassio's shame at his humiliation, Desdemona's well-meaning attempt to play the scold and pressurise her husband into relenting — this whole interlocking structure of dislocated virtue, where every attempt by Othello to free himself from his trap is outwitted by Iago, where all the goodness of Desdemona's pleading on behalf of another merely serves to incriminate her further in the eyes of Othello, who has been made to see the opposite of the truth<sup>24</sup> — this whole superbly articulated, claustrophilic, deeply painful plot-structure is ignored by the feminist critic, reduced to its simplest components — 'the men and the women' — and rearranged into two piles. Neely puts the men's faults on one side, the women's virtues on the other, and thinks that this amounts to literary criticism. All she does is to dismantle the play and use it as a vehicle for somehow getting even with men. Towards the end of her essay, admittedly, she concedes that the women are also partly to blame: 'the men . . . persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other' (p. 228), but this still

represents a reduction of the play to its lowest common denominator — if, indeed, it denominates anything at all. It is *this* man, and *this* woman, in *this* situation, that we should be attending to, a unique and carefully contrived plot-structure that, if decomposed into the genders of the protagonists, loses its wholly specific nature and results in predictable and repetitive generalisations.

To say that 'in the last scene the gulf between men and women widens' (p. 232) is to blind oneself to the painful sight of the deluded Othello killing the woman he loves; to Desdemona loyally trying to exculpate him with her dying words; to Emilia's disgust with Iago, and Othello's disgust with himself once he learns the truth — a complexity of alignment, the false against the true, the true against the false, of deception and discovery, a murder which affirms evil and a suicide which rejects evil and reinstates good (for the record, as it were, not for any usable future) — a complex and shifting alignment that makes any simple reduction of it to 'the men' and 'the women' futile, were it not so obviously serving an ulterior motive. Neely's own *ressentiment* against 'the men' in the play appears openly, at the end:

Although male bombast is virtually silenced at the end of this play . . . — Iago 'never will speak word' (305) and the terseness and precision of Roderigo's dying epithet for Iago ('O inhuman dog') are equalled in Cassio's epitaph for the dead Othello ('For he was great of heart') — Othello's rhetoric continues unchecked. His last speech is his own brand of Iago's 'motive-hunting'. (Neely 1980, p. 233)

Anyone who can equate the speeches by those four men (poor Roderigo manages to gasp out his last breath: was he ever bombastic?), or can accuse Othello in his final speech of merely 'seeing himself . . . as ill-fated, unlucky . . . extolling his services to the state, confessing, asking for justice and judgement, telling stories about the past' — and not register his profound disgust with himself, a 'cursed dog' who deserves to be slain — anyone who can reduce all this to 'male bombast' is allowing her own partisanship for one sex over the other to prevent her actually experiencing the play as a human being. If this is feminism's answer to male chauvinism, then it is like someone whose legs have been cut off cutting off their arms, too.

## V

Carol Neely's may be an extreme case, but the temptation to reduce the complexities of Shakespeare's drama to the simplifying generalisations of 'patriarchy', 'patrilineal society', or 'male vanity' is one that many feminists have fallen for. The last mode of distorting generalisation that I wish to

look at is that caused by feminism's enthusiastic alliance with psychoanalysis. I don't pretend to understand the reasons for this alliance (other than the great prestige of psychoanalysis in American academe, already noticed), but I am disturbed by its effects. Chiefly, it allows endless possibilities of resolving complex plot-structures into simple instances of male this, or female that, merely reinforcing the critic in his or her state of omniscience. It is — who would have guessed? — the men who are primarily exposed by this process, diagnosed, fitted into slots that make their failings more obvious, easily understood, but hardly forgiven. The editors of *The Woman's Part* note that 'as they explore the psychosexual dynamics that underlie the aesthetic, historical, and genre contexts, feminist critics find themselves in an increasingly close alliance with psychoanalytic critics'. Although not altogether happy with Freud,

they make extensive use of psychoanalytic insights into male ambivalence toward female sexuality. Throughout the canon these critics trace a persistent theme — men's inability to reconcile tender affection with sexual desire and their consequent vacillation between idealization and degradation of women. They suggest how structures of male dominance grow out of and mask fears of female power and of male feminization and powerlessness. (Lenz *et al.* 1980, p. 9)

Here is indeed the most popular psychoanalytic paradigm in the whole of feminist criticism: men dominate women because they are afraid of them. The 'profound fears of female sexuality and the desperate attempts to control it in the plays [are] reflections of male ambivalence . . .'

This seems to me a myth. The 'degradation' of women that is referred to is the 'misogyny' so often alleged on so slender a basis. As I have shown, misogynistic utterances are the consequence of men thinking that they have been deceived or betrayed by women they love. There is no unmotivated misogyny in Shakespeare, and it is difficult to recall any men who 'fear women's sexuality', or who 'have doubts about their own masculinity' (wholly anachronistic concepts as these are). Yet the frequency with which feminists allege these psychic states shows how essential this mode of explanation has become. Madelon Gohlke states that 'Antony's relation both to Cleopatra and to Caesar may be read in terms of his anxieties about dominance, his fear of self-loss in any intimate encounter' (Lenz *et al.* 1980, p. 159: intimate encounter with Caesar? That's a new angle!). Peter B. Erickson finds that *Love's Labour's Lost*, 'for all its comic charm, . . . presents an extraordinary exhibition of masculine insecurity and helplessness. While the veneer of male authority is brittle and precarious from the outset, female power is virtually absolute', the first scene quickly exposing 'the pretensions of masculine idealism and the fear of women which underlies it' (Erickson 1981, p. 65). From this surprising statement Erickson rapidly ruins through the play, seeing the women as 'torturing' the men, finding the four courtiers who 'catch one another with

love poems' in 4.3 guilty of 'fraternal voyeurism' (p. 76), and so on. But he never mentions Berowne's superb speech, 'Have at you then, affection's men-at-arms' (4.3.290-365), with its great defence of heterosexual love as a healthy, necessary human activity, not to be denied by a jejune dedication to study or the contemplative life. Feminists have developed a truly remarkable capacity to ignore whatever doesn't fit their interpretations. In the same collection David Sundelson finds at the 'heart' of *Measure for Measure* 'grave fears about the precariousness of male identity and . . . fears of the destructive power of women' (Sundelson 1981, p. 83). No doubt the same judgement will come to be made of every other Shakespeare play, many times over. With such a limited range of templates, psychoanalytic criticism must soon repeat itself.

Another way of classifying male mistreatment of women is to diagnose incestuous desires. For Paula S. Berggren, indeed, 'incest . . . is the obverse of misogyny: it reveals the narcissism underlying the vilification of the female that Shakespeare's tragic heroes so arbitrarily indulge in' (Berggren 1980, p. 26). But not only is there no arbitrary misogyny in the tragedies, incest exists on a very different plane from misogyny: the one is an indiscriminate hatred of all women, the other a sexual desire for women who belong to a close-kin category, variously defined in different cultures. Such fine distinctions are lost on some feminists, who invoke not only incest but even 'pseudo-incest': surely this is too grave an accusation to be blurred in this form. So Diane Elizabeth Dreher appeals to statistics: 'statistical profiles made during the 1970s of incestuous fathers and daughters correspond to many of Shakespeare's characters. He depicted only one case of incest, that of Antiochus in *Pericles*, but the proclivities are obviously there' (Dreher 1986, p. 10). Aren't they just, everywhere! For instance, the Duke in *Two Gentlemen* locks his daughter in 'a high tower to which he himself keeps the key. . . . The tower image, obviously phallic, also suggests hidden incestuous urgings' (p. 49) — not hidden to this critic, at all events. Dreher defines 'pseudo-incest' as the state where 'women remain children emotionally', such as Cordelia and Ophelia, grown women who tend for their father (this is known to others as nurturing), or allow him to meddle in their personal affairs, or like Desdemona, who transfers her obedience to father surrogates (p. 11). This seems to widen the category sufficiently to embrace any father, and any daughter. Dreher hesitantly describes Lear's love for Cordelia as 'pseudo-incest' (p. 69), but Madelon Gohlke is, as ever, more assertive: 'Lear incestuously marries his daughter in the manner of his death' (Gohlke 1981, p. 170). — I like 'marries'.

Some feminists use the widespread psychoanalytic concepts of Self and Other to describe 'the barrier of sexual differentiation' that separates masculine and feminine (Bamber 1982, pp. 4ff) — yet, by the same token, makes their physical and psychic union possible. (But as soon as we think that, we realise that in this school there is no accepted terminology

for a couple, say: we are doomed to monism and separation.) Others invoke Lacan's concept of the phallus (Bamber 1982, p. 156), or Jung's categories animus/anima (Dreher 1986, p. 7), and some contest Freud's phallogocentrism.<sup>25</sup> One example of an eclectic — and confused — use of several schools is Janice Hays, commenting on *Much Ado* (Hays 1980: pp. 95-9 list her many 'authorities'). The target of her analysis is, of course, a man — Claudio, who no sooner feels a 'surge of sexuality' for Hero than he tries to 'defend himself against' it (p. 82): readers may search the text in vain for that reaction. For to love a woman sexually, it seems, mobilises fears about the "bad mother" who, in the male child's eyes, betrayed and abandoned him'. Hays draws on the psycho-social history of Lawrence Stone and his belief that 'most upper-class Renaissance adults' experienced 'severe separation anxiety' when weaned from their wet nurse, a deprivation which, Stone claims, regularly resulted in "psychotic-like attacks of rage", paranoia, and an "inability to maintain human relations", all the results of this childhood trauma' (p. 83). Whether this experience was at all known then, despite Stone's categorical pronouncements (another master of the rhetoric of assertiveness — 'overwhelmingly obvious in all the documentation of the period'), and what, in any case, its relevance to Claudio might be, — these are points simply taken as granted.

'Further', Hays goes on, 'for the young adult male to relate to a tenderly regarded woman sexually might seem perilously akin to incest, since the idealized woman would recall the nurturing women who were the objects of the boy's earliest tender feelings' — wet nurse, natural mother, or sister, 'all these women, in Renaissance patriarchal society, clearly the property of the father or father-figure'. (Hays usefully recapitulates most of the older feminist orthodoxies.) 'Poor Claudio!' we may well feel at this point, as our psychocritic has virtually closed off all the avenues to a normal, happy sexual relationship. Who would dare love a woman with such perils all around? If we turn to Claudio's relationship with men, notably his appeal to Don Pedro to help him in his suit for Hero, we find further dangers. The older man's encouragement to 'proceed without delay', although meant kindly, is now presented as a further crisis:

Such permission from a parental authority-figure to follow the promptings of desire, which in any adolescent male might well contain remnants of his feelings toward the original woman or women in his life, could let loose a flood indeed of incestuous fantasies and consequent fears of retaliation from the 'father'. (p. 84)

What is really 'let loose' here, I fear, is the psychocritic's desire to re-write the play according to neo-Freudian narrative models. She no sooner imagines Claudio's reaction to a father-figure giving him licence to woo than she makes the young man recoil on himself, his 'punitive conscience' expecting 'retaliation as a consequence of wishing to compete against the father-figure represented [sic] by Don Pedro' (p. 85). But if Don Pedro has

just given him the go-ahead, how can Claudio be competing with him? The author prefers to cite Lawrence Stone, again, on the apparently never-ending 'struggle', in the Renaissance, 'between fathers and sons, with consequent guilt and vindictiveness on both sides'. Life must have been awful then.

In the masked-ball scene Don Pedro disguises as Claudio, and exchanges some badinage with Hero, which the audience can hear but Claudio not (2.1.86ff). Penetrating Claudio's disguise, the villain Don John maliciously tells him that Don Pedro is actually 'enamoured on Hero', and — it being a convention in Elizabethan drama that slander is believed — Claudio concludes that 'the Prince woos for himself. . . . Farewell therefore Hero!' (161–182). But this false impression is soon cleared up, and Don Pedro tells him that he has gained the consent of both Hero and her father to the marriage. As Janice Hays reads the scene,

Claudio stands to one side, watching but not participating, shut out from the interaction between Don Pedro and Hero, his posture suggesting what psychoanalysis terms a 'primal scene', in which the child sees (or fantasizes seeing) sexual relations between the parents and feels excluded and thus defeated in the hopes of securing idealized parental love. (p. 85)

But Claudio is not at all concerned with Don Pedro (who is not his father, in any case), but with Hero; and anything less like the primal scene than this courtly dance could hardly be imagined. Wheeling up yet another psychoanalytic concept, in a kind of fantasia on feminist themes, Hays suggests that the speed with which Claudio rejects Hero shows that he is afraid to 'compete with Don Pedro', which suggests in turn that he clings to 'male bonding . . . as a defense against the anxieties occasioned by heterosexuality'. If so, he is soon plunged into them by the announcement of parental consent: he makes a brief speech, kisses Hero, who — as Beatrice perceptively sees — 'tells him in his ear that he is in her heart' (2.1.315).

Happy end to the wooing stage, we might feel. But not for Hays: this paternal restraint 'out of the way, Claudio is now forced to confront the incestuous fantasies that have hitherto been held in check'. What fantasies? Whose incest? How do you know? Well, the critic goes on, 'Shakespeare uses the mock-assignation scene' — she means Don John's disguise plot, aided by Borachio, to make Claudio think Hero promiscuous — in order 'to externalize . . . Claudio's sexual fantasies about Hero' (p. 86). What she has in mind is the fact that when Borachio outlines the plot, he says that Claudio will 'see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me *Claudio*' (2.2.33ff). This is apparently a slip of Shakespeare's pen, and some editors follow Theobald in emending to Borachio. To Hays, though, it can only be a Freudian 'parapraxis', and 'it is axiomatic in psychoanalytic theory that when the ego dozes, id material

works its way to the surface . . .': the question is, though, whose id? To Hays

What the mock-assignation suggests is a disguised version of Hero being made love to by a Borachio who bears enough resemblance to Claudio [an illicit deduction!] so that Shakespeare could inadvertently confuse their names. Its outlines resemble what Freud reported as being certain masturbation fantasies, common during male adolescence, in which the young man imagines the mother and sister . . .

— but you can guess the rest. Don John's staging of this scene, then, 'is a dramatic enactment of Claudio's internal conflict', and reveals 'the incestuous root of Claudio's anxiety' (p. 86).

So, just to recapitulate the plot so far: Claudio is a young man unsure of his own sexuality who fears to express affection for any woman lest this revive the incestuous feelings which he had, as a child, for whatever woman with whom he had had close contact — wet nurse, mother, sister. So that, when he sees Borachio wooing Hero, it is not the spectacle of his fiancée apparently betraying him with another man that disturbs him, but the anxiety he feels at the thought that he might — or soon will — have to fill the part that Borachio is playing now, with all its overtones of incest. Can one imagine a more wilfully distorted reading of a crystal-clear plot-sequence? To Hays, though, the fact that Claudio affirms that he never 'tempted' Hero with immoral suggestions, but behaved 'as a brother to his sister', with 'bashful sincerity and comely love' — this is the real give-away, declaring his 'unconscious incestuous fantasies' (p. 87), further glossed by an elaborate citation from Freud (p. 98, n. 21). Also to blame, of course, is 'a patriarchal value system' that treats 'woman and her sexuality as a man's exclusive possession', and 'makes a woman's virginity an extension of male pride — particularly when no one has ever thought to ask about Claudio's sexual purity or lack of it' (pp. 87–8) — truly an oversight.

One might have thought that this play had now been totally explicated, every fantasy put in its appropriate slot. But as if not wholly satisfied with the psycho-feminist approach, Hays now switches registers rather opportunistically, drawing on religious and philosophical sources, and reading the apparent death of Hero as 'an aspect of the Christian concept of grace'; also as an instance of the "Demeter-Persephone life style" which women have developed to cope with human 'vulnerability and weakness' — that is, 'a "going down in order to come up"' (the collocation of these mythical figures and modern colloquialism is incongruous, to say the least); and finally in terms of Renaissance Neoplatonism, with its model of separation and return (pp. 88–92). Despite this upbeat argument, which now sees Claudio (almost forgivingly) as 'having gone through 'a ritual of atonement' to acquire 'God's extension of Grace' (p. 93), Hays ends by finding the Hero-Claudio plot 'not fully credible and convincing'

(p. 95). But this is to call in question the success of her own various interpretive strategies, an unusual admission from a school which usually evinces total self-belief.

No such doubts afflict Karen Newman, making a heady mixture of Freud and Lacan in order to link 'Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*'. One of the key pieces of evidence for this linkage is Othello's handkerchief, which Newman describes in 'post-Saussurian' terms as 'snowballing signifier,' — an unfortunate metaphor for a piece of linen — 'for as it passes from hand to hand, both literal and critical, it accumulates myriad [which means 'ten thousand', or 'countless'] associations and meanings.' In psychoanalytic terms, Newman writes,

the handkerchief which Othello inherits from his mother and then gives to Desdemona has been read symptomatically as the fetishist's substitution for the mother's missing phallus. Like the shoe Freud's young boy substitutes 'for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy believed in and does not wish to forego', the handkerchief is the fetish which endows [women with a penis and so makes them] 'acceptable as sex objects' — that is, makes them like men. (Newman 1987, p. 156)

Those naïve people who believed that women were 'acceptable' — but much more than as 'sex objects' — precisely because they were not like men, had better think again, especially if they meet a woman carrying a handkerchief, which may be a phallus-endowing fetish. To even understand this argument it is first necessary to accept Freud's theory of fetishism and the (felt) anomaly of the woman's 'missing' penis. Commenting on Barbara Johnson's discussion of Derrida's surmisal that in Lacan's interpretation of Poe's 'The purloined letter', 'the letter is [for Lacan] a symbol of the mother's (missing) phallus', A.D. Nuttall observes that in this sophisticated discussion 'the sheer improbability of the central notion is not noticed' (Nuttall 1983, p. 29). This is now unquestioned dogma.

Having accepted, like so many psycho-feminists, the Freudian repertoire of phallic symbolism, Newman suddenly changes course, objecting that 'the psychoanalytic scenario is problematic because it privileges a male scopic drama, casting the woman' — as so often in Freud — 'as a failed man' (Newman 1987, p. 156). Further, she argues, the handkerchief figures not only a lack, 'the missing penis', but a much more serious one, namely

a desiring femininity which is described in the play as aberrant and 'monstrous' or a 'monster'. The handkerchief, with its associations with the mother, witchcraft, and the marvelous, represents the link between femininity and the monstrous which Othello and Desdemona's union figures in the play. It figures a female sexual topography that is more than a sign of male possession, violated virginity, even deceit, and more than the fetishist's beloved object. It figures not only Desdemona's lack . . . but also her own sexual parts —

since it has strawberries embroidered on it, which could represent her nipples, 'lips, and even perhaps the clitoris'. The handkerchief has (if not 'myriad' still quite a few) other significances in this critic's eyes: 'psychologically, because it signifies male fears of duplicity, consummation, and castration', and also 'politically . . . because it has become a *feminine trifle*', so that the whole play's 'tragic action is structured . . . around a trifle, a feminine toy' (*ibid.*). Despite the immense growth in critical sophistication since 1693, that argument matches Rymer in once again reducing the multiple motivation of a complex drama to a single item of linen.

The striking feature of the modern sequence is the speed and confidence with which it delivers its interpretation: evidently Newman derives from, and writes for, a context in which such interpretations are common sustenance. Yet the goal of her essay — equating femininity with the monstrous and with miscegenation — is not only depressing (is Desdemona, or woman in general, really to be understood as the product of inter-racial breeding?), but misguided. Her evidence for saying that femininity is described in the play as 'aberrant' — which, if true, would put *Othello* on the same level as Aristotle's statement that the male sex is the norm, the female 'as it were a deformity', though required by nature<sup>26</sup> — consists of three moments: first, Iago's declaration, at the end of his first soliloquy —

I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

(1.3.395ff)

Second, Othello's anguished response to Iago —

'Think, my lord?' By heaven, thou echo'st me  
As if there were some monster in thy thought  
Too hideous to be shown!

(3.3.110ff)

Third, Othello's reaction to Iago's false story of Cassio's erotic dream — 'O monstrous, monstrous!' (3.3.431). The first use of the word gives us Iago's estimate of his plan to destroy Othello; the second use describes the ominous hints (as yet quite undefined) that Iago is signalling to Othello; the third use is for Othello's horrified reaction to the invented story about Cassio kissing Iago in his dream, thinking him Desdemona. All three uses, as anyone can see, refer to men, not women. There are, as it happens, three other uses of the word 'monster' in *Othello* (most familiarly, Iago's description of jealousy as 'the green-ey'd monster') and four of 'monstrous', but at no time do they refer to female sexuality. Newman has violated one of the fundamental principles of literary criticism, or indeed of any argument that purports to support itself by reference to a text, namely that the critic using such quotations must pay attention (in drama) to who speaks the words in question, in what situation, and to what purpose. If this principle is not observed then texts become merely random collections of lexical items, any of which may be cited by any reader to prove any argument.

One might have imagined, without referring to the play, that in the superheated world of delusions that Iago creates in Othello's mind, female sexuality could seem 'monstrous' to either the guller or his dupe. But — perhaps surprisingly — it doesn't, and there is simply no basis for Newman's claim that 'the play' describes femininity as aberrant. Whatever the cause of this error — hasty misreading; determination to find evidence to support one's thesis — Newman's equation of the feminine with the monstrous, on which the rest of her essay is based, is self-generated, illusory, and monstrous. (Do editors no longer read, or check what their contributors say?)

The other notable features of Newman's account are its unrelenting search for sexual significances, and the plasticity of its so-called sexual symbolism. As one critic observes, 'the reintroduction of Freudian notions in a poststructuralist critical environment can afford little more than a set of mental toys' (Nuttall 1983, p. 29). The game is easy to play because the counters involved are so insubstantial, so weightless that one can be easily substituted for another. The handkerchief not only symbolises Othello's mother's missing penis, and Desdemona's missing penis, and Desdemona's female genitals, and inter-racial copulation, it also (multi-potent symbol!) signifies male fears both of 'consummation, and castration' — as if Desdemona represented a version of the *vagina dentata* myth. This reduction of all human activity to the sexual plane — 'Is man no more than this?' — is all too typical of Freudian literary criticism. What is particularly disturbing, in this free-for-all discovery of whatever meanings the critic wishes to attach to a symbol, is the absence of any constraints. As the previous chapter demonstrated so often, Freudian literary criticism is wholly lacking in any principles that could lead it to disqualify some interpretations as unfounded. Free association, it seems, is the law for both analysands and analysts. Occasionally one does not know in which category to put the critic.

## VI

Psychoanalysis may come to seem, in time, a discipline from which feminist criticism will wish to distance itself. I hope so, for it can only support those dangerous temptations to reduce the complexity of the plays to the self-pleasing, simplistic, and repetitive categories of gender, or patriarchy, or the weaknesses of the male species. As Richard Levin has shown in a penetrating analysis,<sup>27</sup> feminist commentators on Shakespeare's tragedies have in effect agreed that the plays are 'not really about the particular characters who appear there but about some general idea', the woman's world on the one hand, and 'patriarchal society' or 'masculine consciousness' on the other (Levin 1988, pp. 127–8). Predictably enough, these critics find 'the concept of masculinity . . . to blame for the tragedy'

(p. 132). Yet, as Levin points out, 'gender relations are only one of the components' of the world of each play, and are not so much causes as 'necessary conditions of the action' — Lear as father and King, Cordelia as daughter. In themselves gender relations are incapable of generating a tragic action. Lear's rejection of Cordelia in the opening scene is said by one feminist to illustrate the tyranny of patriarchy, but, Levin notes, 'the witnesses to this rejection — Kent, Gloucester, Burgundy, France, even Goneril and Regan — all of whom presumably share these patriarchal assumptions; regard his behaviour as a shocking abnormality' (p. 127). What is at stake, I would add, is not patriarchy but Lear's inability to distinguish integrity from ingratitude, and his readiness to break a natural bond to assuage his injured vanity. The play does not divide here into men and women but into flatterers and truth-tellers, those who respect natural bonds and those who can deny them. At this point in the play Lear shares the values of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, and he (like others) pays most bitterly for it. In *Othello*, another feminist claims, Othello's killing of Desdemona is 'the consequence of the gender roles imposed on the pair by their patriarchal society'. Yet, Levin rightly rejoins, 'the characters who comment on it (including Othello himself after he learns the truth) do not view it as one of your everyday patriarchal events' but rather as a 'horrifying violation of the norms of their world' (*ibid.*).

In feminism, Levin concludes, the relationship between 'the facts' of the play and 'the theme' explored by the critic undergoes a strange reversal. Feminist critics 'can always make their thematic concepts of gender fit the facts of the play, because the facts are defined by the theme, rather than the reverse'. So when a feminist asserts that the jealousy of Leontes is 'intrinsic to the male psyche' — ignoring the fact that 'all the men who comment on Leontes's accusation of Hermione take *her* side' — the critic is not deriving his concept of the male psyche from *The Winter's Tale* but is 'imposing it on the play' (p. 130). As with other thematic criticism, in order to make the untidy complexities of a play fit the paradigm writers either omit material not relevant to the 'formulation of the theme' (p. 128: the cashiering of Cassio, say), or else ignore passages in the text which would contradict it. Harry Berger, eager to find an all-pervasive *machismo* in *Macbeth*, cites the episode where Macduff learns that his family has been killed, quoting Malcolm's line urging Macduff to 'Dispute it like a man', an obviously suspect sexist remark. But he leaves out Macduff's answer, 'I shall do so; / But I must also feel it like a man' (4.3.220ff), which, as Levin says, 'asserts a very different sense of manhood' (p. 129). Carol Neely, seeing all the evil in *Othello* as proceeding from the men in the play, accuses them of persistently blaming others for their actions, citing Desdemona's last words, exonerating Othello from responsibility. But she fails to mention Othello's response: 'She's like a liar gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that kill'd her'. Levin summarises the direction of Neely's reading of *Othello* (in terms that we could apply to much feminist criticism) as

being to homogenise male behaviour in the plays and level it down 'to the lowest common denominator': the men are 'all supposed to be competitive, cowardly, foolish, jealous, passive, vain, swaggering, and murderous', evading responsibility and incapable of friendship (p. 129). In this reductive and repetitive process the heroes of the plays 'emerge as a sorry lot indeed, having lost virtually all their admirable qualities and even their individuality' (p. 131). Ironically, having freed Shakespeare's women of 'negative [sexist] stereotypes' feminists are now 'imposing such stereotypes on his men'. Yet, Levin observes, in Shakespearian tragedy — and, I would hope, in life — 'our appreciation of one sex never depends on the depreciation of the other' (p. 131).

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This 'sexist stereotyping' of the male protagonist shows, finally, that feminist Shakespeare criticism has got stuck in the attitudes of the so-called second wave, that antagonistic phase of the 1960s which defined woman as 'person oppressed by a male power system' (Vendler 1990, p. 21). In the last ten years or so attempts have been made to refine simplistic feminist concepts, attempts which must be welcomed, as Helen Vendler puts it, as a sign that feminists are recognising the 'sheer diversity among women, and the insufficiency of any one definition of them (whether psychoanalytic, sociological, or political)' (*ibid.*). Such 'essentialist' theories as (Nancy Chodorow's) that 'universal models of "the reproduction of mothering"' exist, or (Carol Gilligan's) that 'women in general "have a different voice"', Vendler writes, 'have been plausibly accused of drawing wide conclusions about "women" from samples drawn from a single culture or social class or historical moment' (*ibid.*, p. 22). Whereas the real issue, as one feminist recently declared, is that

For some writers, gender is no more and perhaps not even as basic as poverty, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, and age, in the lives of women who feel less divided from men as a group than, for example, from white or bourgeois or Anglo or heterosexual men and women.' (*cit. ibid.*)

Vendler herself sees the 'unacknowledged problem' of feminism from the outset as having been its 'ascription of special virtue to women', either in the sentimental version, that 'men, as a class, are base and women are moral', or in the angry version, 'that men are oppressors and women are oppressed'. To 'cooler feminist minds', however, 'the possession of power, rather than whether one is a woman or a man, is what determines the act of oppression' (*ibid.*). Citing evidence of "egregious selfishness" in women, not physical violence but rather 'the character-destroying behavior — harshness, hatred, silence, and neglect — of some mothers' (pp. 21–2), Vendler describes 'the truth concealed by feminism' as being 'the abuse of

power by both sexes, and the deficient moral behaviour of both men and women to each other and to children' (p. 22). She argues that feminism must achieve a 'de-idealizing of women', recognising that they can be 'victimizers as well as victims', and can be 'bigoted against men just as men are bigoted against them'. This change of attitude, obviously enough, 'in no way precludes protest of ill-treatment of women', but it will stop the falsifications produced by idealising women and degrading men.

In *Feminism without illusions: a critique of individualism* (1991), the feminist historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has drawn on a wide range of contemporary work that also criticises the simplistic paradigms of the 60s. One chapter is called 'Beyond sisterhood', showing how that metaphor encouraged solidarity but produced a false image of womanhood as 'a universal condition', ignoring vast differences in 'cultural, social and economic realities' (Fox-Genovese 1991, p. 17). That 'white middle-class women' should have assumed the right to speak for all women merely 'alienated many lower-class and black women, who see their primary oppression as deriving from their class or race', and it also blinded mainstream feminism to its responsibility to 'defend social and economic changes that can ensure decent lives for all people' (pp. 18–19). The model of sisterhood, further, placed woman within the family and encouraged 'the myth of separate spheres, which has cast women as the softening antidote' to male competitiveness, 'innately nurturing and dependent', thus locating women in the domestic not the public world (pp. 20–21), and promoting "a biologicistic and fatalistic interpretation of the inevitability of men's power" (p. 20). The 'myth of separate spheres is bankrupt' now, Fox-Genovese writes, along with 'the vision of distinct women's values', for 'in representing "women as essentially virtuous and men as essentially vicious"', as one feminist put it, 'it "serves the forces of reaction as surely as it serves the forces of progress"' (p. 32).

Other concepts of 1960s feminism also need revision. The popular tactic of blaming all forms of oppression on misogyny continues to 'personalize gender relations' and to ignore 'the ways in which societies construct men's and women's roles and identities'. Also deficient as a theoretical explanation is what some feminists now see as the 'ahistorical' and 'conspiratorial' concept of patriarchy:

To group all forms of male dominance under the single rubric of patriarchy is to fall into the similar trap of homogenizing all forms of male domination and thereby obscuring their specific characteristics. (p. 143)

It also risks 'homogenizing the experience of women themselves', for the 'familial metaphor' of patriarchy 'implicitly holds that men justify their rule over women on grounds of innate physical superiority', and so 'reduces women to their physical attributes', reinforcing 'precisely that view of women as innately "other", against which many feminists protest'. Worse

still, in some feminists' eyes, the essentialist theory of patriarchy 'reduces the significance of differences among women and thus minimizes the social dimension of women's experience and identities' (p. 145). The economic (and partly Marxist) emphasis of some current feminist thought would identify a much more serious threat to women's existence in capitalism, likely to produce 'yet more humiliation for most, if not all, women' (p. 29), for the 'corrosive' effect of 'the market' as the sole criterion of socio-economic existence erodes the notion of community and encourages individualism (p. 44), makes households increasingly dependent on two salaries (pp. 63-4), and has 'destructive effects on the lives of women throughout the world' (p. 185).

Fox-Genovese summarises and extends much feminist writing of the 1980s in seeing the need to formulate 'a new conception of the economy and polity than can take account of sexual asymmetry without subjugating women to men' (p. 86). Rejecting the 'postmodernist dismissal of difference' as a mere product of language (pp. 238, 145-8), she urges feminists to see difference as a reality in human experience, not an 'unchanging polarity' but something that is 'historically as well as biologically grounded and interpreted', and is thus 'subject to constant reinterpretation' (p. 238). Women's needs must be fought for not 'in the name of atomistic individualistic principles', but 'in the name of social justice for all... viewed as responsible and interdependent members of society' (p. 86). The need to avoid one-sidedness is particularly pressing in the writing of history. Although it rightly judges the past to have been unjust, feminism 'cannot afford uncritically to glorify women's discrete part of it', nor assume 'that the male-dominated historical context contributed nothing to it'. Many readers, I hope, will agree with the corollary she draws:

If feminism indeed contains redemptive promise for our society and culture, it can only realize that promise by cultivating both a critical attitude toward the past and a commitment to our history — whatever its injustices — as the history of women as well as of men. (p. 235)

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So far, at any rate, the achievements of feminist history seem greater than those of feminist literary criticism. This may be because the record of the past offers much significant material that has never been properly used. For centuries social history was not deemed worthy of serious attention, or only treated in an ephemeral fashion, so that the historiographical innovations of the last forty years or so have been able to use fresh material and to reinterpret familiar material according to fresh interpretive models. Literary texts have never been neglected to this extent; indeed the intensive study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature that has been going on

since the eighteenth century has made a great amount of writing, with all its strengths and weaknesses, common property. There is no comparable body of unused material. Feminist literary criticism of a historical kind has unearthed some unknown or lesser known literature, much of it historically illuminating about the role of the woman writers of the Renaissance, who (with the solitary exception of Aphra Behn) were amateur, non professional. Their work has the same limitations as that of amateur men writers, cut off from the public arena which discourages so many of the untalented, and exposes those who do find a footing to the necessity of satisfying a reading or theatre-going public. That challenge, together with occasional feedback from readers or critics, is the greatest stimulus to the self-criticism by which a writer develops. Denied that arena and that stimulus, the writings of most amateur writers, male or female, hardly repay prolonged study (e.g., Vendler 1990, p. 22).

As for reinterpreting well-known literature, my complaint would be that feminist criticism has not developed any fresh interpretive models. Its massive assumption, that the literature of the past can be scrutinised in the light of our politically-based categories of gender, patriarchy and oppression, and can still yield criticism that illuminates it as literature, rather than as proto-political documents, is seldom questioned, with the predictable result that much recent work is anachronistic, alien to the mental and social world of the literature studied. The great majority of the Shakespeare criticism I have read has not progressed beyond the stereotyping, incriminatory mode, or has allied itself with the easy routines of psychoanalysis, Freudian and after, which provide convenient templates for the old family-guilt narratives, but are incapable of innovation. The challenge for a feminist Shakespeare criticism in the next generation will be to absorb the self-critical developments in feminist theory while acquiring a far greater knowledge of social conditions in the Renaissance, more familiarity with Renaissance literary theory (genre, convention, structure, rhetoric), and a far deeper understanding of the ways in which literature functions. Those feminists actively concerned with furthering the place of women in the academy should also not forget the enormously valuable work done in precisely these areas by a distinguished roll of women scholars, whose publications have been neglected of late as not fitting the current political paradigms. Like many other students of this period, I owe a great deal to the writings of such scholars as Rosemond Tuve, Sister Miriam Joseph, Muriel Bradbrook, Madeleine Doran, Alice Walker and Gladys Willcock, Molly Mahood, Jean Robertson, Anne Barton, the late Margot Heinemann, and others. That tradition, which had no immediately political goal in view, still offers many renewing sources of energy and insight.

At all events, whatever agenda we propose for feminist criticism, the settling of immediate political scores is no longer sufficient.