

## Surfaces



Marc Shell, *Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993)

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**MARC SHELL:**

### ***CHILDREN OF THE EARTH: LITERATURE, POLITICS, AND NATIONHOOD***

Robert Waswo

**Marc Shell, *Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).**

Here is another good, thought-provoking, and rather odd book from the hand of Professor Shell, whose philological tenacity and massive erudition have altered their focus from questions about economics (*The Economy of Literature.*, 1978; *Money, Language, and Thought*, 1982) to those about kinship (*The End of Kinship*, 1988). The latter book explored "the ideal of universal siblinghood" in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; this one analyzes the contradictions in that ideal as they unfold in a much vaster range of contexts: from fifteenth-century Spain and sixteenth-century England to nineteenth-century America and (not quite) contemporary Quebec, with constant excursions into ancient (Platonic and Roman), medieval, and biblical versions of universal brotherhood. The general aim of the book is to show how, and how often, the "apparently genial motto 'All men are brothers'" gets actualized in politics as "only my 'brothers' are men" (vii), with the predictable and depressing result that such universalism "does not allow for conceiving a creature as being at once nonkin and kind and thus encourages us to treat as nonhuman those we might already regard as nonkin" (38)--as was literally done in the Spanish designation of *conversos* as *marranos* (pigs). The elimination of any middle ground between species (kind) and family (kin) is what, repeatedly, transforms such "apparently genial" doctrines of toleration into endless acts of intolerance. On this score, Christianity, of course, does rather more damage than either Judaism or Islam, both of which have such a middle ground, a space for human (and religious) others between the coreligious brethren and the animal kingdom.

As a critique of universalist doctrines, and a plea for "potentially tolerant particularism" (194), the book is admirable, convincing, and timely.

Its intelligence in this respect is moral in the best sense: that is, it never levels easy accusations of hypocrisy at any writer or institution or way of thinking; instead, it locates the problem in the ideologies themselves, and sympathizes with those who must struggle with their contradictions. Equally intelligent, and sometimes amusing, is the ground on which the critique proceeds: the dismantling of the common assumption that we can know for sure just who our parents or brothers or sisters are. From the epistemological problem that certain knowledge of consanguinity is almost never available, through the historical problem of changelings, bastards and foundlings, to the social problem of competing ways to define "families" -- genetic, adoptive, collactaneous (a fine archaic term for 'sucking the same milk'), ritualistic or ceremonial -- Shell continually demonstrates the near-impossibility of distinguishing between 'literal' and 'figurative' kin, and the consequent significance, especially for politics, of the metaphorical latter.

These metaphors have real consequences for people's lives and beliefs: the medieval doctrine of "carnal contagion" (by which siblings-in-law fell under the incest prohibition), for example, was the basis for Henry VIII's declaring his daughter Elizabeth illegitimate. In the densest chapter of the book (4), Shell describes this situation and Elizabeth's response, which was to present herself, both literally and figuratively, as a Virgin Queen who replicated with her kingdom the Virgin Mary's fourfold relation to (the twofold Christian) God: as child, mother, sister, and wife. Notwithstanding the utility, for the monarch, of thus conceiving her subjects as her children, it imposed on the children the (metaphorical?) inevitability of their all being incestuous. The next chapter (5) is an original and thorough re-reading of *Hamlet* in this light, as a tragedy of the necessary refusal or denial of incest. From "more than kin, and less than kind" through the "nunnery" (i.e. celibacy as the only solution to incestuous whoredom) to the only "union" that remains possible -- death, the play must destroy the (symbolic?) siblinghood that threatens universally.

If the variously linked royal families in *Hamlet* suffer from too much siblinghood, those in the tragedies of Racine (Ch. 6) suffer from too little. Here "orphanhood" (the literal status of Jean himself) is the condition to be sublated (or sublimated?), in the royal family by the Roman practice of adrogation, and in the citizenry of the nascent modern state by regarding it as the parent who will (later) guarantee our universal *fraternité*. In this neatly contrastive picture of the familial figurations for the relationship of the citizen to the government in the then (17-18cc) dominant and competing imperial powers of Europe (supplanted by the account, in Chapter 2, of the first such power, Spain), there are numerous, and fertile, implications that the history of the modern (psychological) subject is a function of his and her political definition. Shell does not directly pursue such implications, but recounts instead, by developing a suggestion of Edmund Leach, the modern

history of keeping pets. For these amiable creatures are "intermediating" (169) between our categories of the human and nonhuman, the paradoxical combination of kin but not kind. They get treated as consanguineous family members (we don't copulate with them) and not as animals (we don't eat them). Shell teases out of this borderline status an "ideology of pethood" (175) -- from St. Francis to the SPCA -- that sentimentalizes and obfuscates the more nefarious operations of the notion of universal brotherhood.

I hope to have indicated much of the brilliance and some of the oddity of this book. Its most apparent structural oddity is the chapter (3) on bilingual advertisements in Québec, which is quite remotely tangential to the subjects of kin and kind. It is made more tangential by being mainly a reprint of a 1973 article, whose point is that the real problem is not the rivalry for domination of either the English or French languages but rather the use of both merely to mediate and serve the interests of commodification. *Et alors?* What language in the First World does not serve such interests? What advertisement in any language fails to assure us that all sorts of "problems are solvable by economic consumption" (56)? What exact threat does commercial use pose? Not only was this not specified in 1973, but Shell offers no effort to test this curious diagnosis in the twenty years since. Amusing bilingual signs still exist in Montréal; droll examples of *Franglais* and *Fringlish*, conversational *plaisanteries* that exploit both interference and code-switching are hearable everywhere (as Shell is well aware). Nor have political antagonisms decreased. Has commodification, not diminished either, anything to do with all this? And what, above all, has advertising to do with brotherhood? Shell's twenty-year-old photographs do not show ads promising siblinghood (in either language) as the result of consuming the same brand of soap powder. In other words, the point of the article was dubious then; now and in this book, it seems neither cogent nor coherent.

The larger oddity that menaces general coherence is the kind of lapidary pedantry habitual to Shell: I mean his entrancement by details, his exactitude and magnitude of citation, his breadth of genuinely interdisciplinary reference. All these are good in themselves; they are requirements of serious scholarship. But all are overdone here, to a combined extent that makes it sometimes difficult to follow the larger argument through the thickets of documentation, and that makes the whole book somewhat user-unfriendly. It contains 198 pages of text, with 154 pages of endnotes, bibliography, and index. Despite some obvious efforts to keep readers on track (general summaries in preface and conclusion; titled subsections of chapters), we often have a hard time figuring out why a given issue is being raised at a given point. And the more interested we are in the wealth of tangential detail, the harder the going is, since the copious notes are both expository and documentary. The former lead us down various, sometimes fascinating, tangential paths that leave us badly disoriented when we've flipped back to the text. And the latter necessitate two flipping operations to identify full references: flip from text to notes, which contain abbreviations that require flipping onward to the bibliography. Perhaps this regimen was imposed by the publisher; it is in any case wasteful of our energy and trying to our patience. Tangents ought to be explored in the text

or even in *footnotes* (as they were in some of Shell's earlier books); references should be findable in a single flip -- as they would be if made parenthetically in the text. The format employed here, whoever is responsible for it, is a terrible and typical compromise made by humanists in defiance of the much handier social-science practice. And it does serious disservice to a book as dense and provocative as this one. If we citizens of the republic of letters are not quite siblings, we are at least fellow-workers who owe each other the common courtesy of making the tasks we share easier, instead of harder.

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