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Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance
Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to "King Lear" (review)

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lative retelling of Hedvig's past life with Hjalmar, her beliefs, feelings, etc., over the years (262–63) comes dangerously close to the Victorian mode of “The Childhood of Shakespeare's Heroines.”

There is always a danger of approaching works of art with a specific thesis and then selecting only those plays, and only those details, that serve the thesis. Nietzsche derided scholars who resemble archaeologists triumphantly unearthing artifacts they themselves had buried. The best precaution against this malady most incident to critics is close analysis of the *whole* play: submitting to its structure, its inner dialectic. Moi's commentaries and judgments, while frequently interesting and even penetrating, are rarely backed up by serious analyses of the plays as objective, finely accomplished works of dramatic art—which is what the academic modernists will be on the lookout for.

There is much in Moi's discussion of the plays and her judgments that one will agree or disagree with. It is difficult to do justice to this exasperating, frequently brilliant, often perverse study. There is not enough space here to cite all that I found impressive nor enough to list everything that I found mistaken in its approach. At least, however, *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* is never a dull reading experience.

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Katharine Goodland. *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to “King Lear.”* Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005. Pp. 254. \$94.95.

The most innovative element in Katharine Goodland's capable study of female dramatic mourning lies in its willingness to trace the continuity from secularized presentations of mourning in Renaissance drama, back to the laments of the Virgin to the medieval cycle plays. For while a number of excellent studies have been done about Renaissance cultural trauma as a product of the radical changes of the Reformation, few of them give much attention to the elaborate scenarios of death and mourning promulgated by medieval theater. Medieval culture, Goodland explains, emphasized the continuity of the living and the dead by dramatizing communal grief over a dead body (e.g., Christ's or Lazarus's). Building on the work of Huston Diehl and Michael Neill, Goodland sees Renaissance secular drama as restoring the unity disrupted by the Protestant curtailment of Catholic mourning rituals. Thus, when the Reformation

banished the corpse from the church, the Renaissance theater restored it by placing it prominently onstage. In the same way, the frenzied mourners of the Renaissance revenge plays replaced as cultural instruments the pietà scenes banished from art and religious theater.

Goodland lays out her argument in her "General Introduction." From this point on, she divides her books into two parts: "Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval English Drama" and "Deranging Female Lament in Renaissance Tragedy." Each of these parts is further subdivided, though not equally; three chapters are devoted to medieval drama, five to Renaissance tragedy. In the introduction to part 1, Goodland argues that the medieval mystery plays "attempt to reconcile the ethos of the residual practice of female lament with that of the dominant Christian theology" (35). By the sixteenth century, however, all such attempts have (Goodland argues) been abandoned. This is the focus of part 2, the introduction of which connects such Renaissance phenomena as the rise of elegy writing, male melancholia, and the funeral sermon to the suppression of the old public displays of grief by women and the church rituals that sanctioned them. Such rituals included the "month's mind," mourning wear and cloaks, shortened funeral activity, and the elimination of masses for the dead.

That the reconciliation attempted by the mystery plays was often only an attempt, the first chapter ("Resistant Female Grief in the Lazarus Plays") makes clear. For while Lazarus plays do indeed incorporate female grief in ways that, in the N-Town and York plays at least, "evoke ritual lament" (41), three of the pageants she surveys (N-Town, York, and Towneley) prepare the way for Renaissance rejection of female lament by energetically condemning the practice, while the last two deny the weeping tradition altogether. In Chester, this is accomplished by transforming the weeping into prayer, while the Digby emphasizes Mary's stoicism in the face of Christ's death. In effect, the differences between the medieval and sixteenth-century practices seem mere differences of degree, and modest at that.

No such condemnation appears in the pageants of chapter 2, "Maternal Mourning and Tragedy in the Nativity and Passion Plays," largely because in these plays mourning serves a Christian purpose; the women simultaneously witness evil, curse evildoers, and call for divine justice. In this chapter, Goodland elaborately compares the parallels between the mothers of the slaughtered Innocents and the distressed Mary of the Flight. She then persuasively argues that the women "lament the burden of motherhood" (67) and are united by their suffering (63). Goodland is particularly convincing when discussing the Chester cycle, where the "comic battle of the sexes" that overlays the brutal slaughter probably induced the audience to cheer the women, even while they laughed at the humor (71).

Chapter 3, “Residual Lament in the Resurrection Plays,” strikes a balance somewhere between the first two chapters. The resurrection plays resemble the Lazarus plays insofar as several again anticipate Renaissance rejection of such rituals by bringing on male authority figures (including Christ) to reprove Mary Magdalene and/or the three Marys for their excessive, improper, and unchristian laments. That the pageants deliberately draw attention to these reproofs is clear, since they might easily omit them; most of the Gospels (as Goodland notes) do not mention feminine weeping, and John mentions Mary Magdalene’s weeping only briefly. Clearly Goodland is right to see here “a contemporary issue of some concern” (85). This time, however, the Towneley and N-Town resurrections do assimilate female lament: the first through a series of reversals, and the second by fusing it with Christian theology (88). The conflicted position of the cycle plays on an issue that they clearly thought important may, Goodland argues, help to explain both Shakespeare’s use of this tradition in *Richard III* and his rejection of it in *Hamlet*.

Chapter 4, “Constance and the Claims of Passion,” argues that Constance’s vociferous grief in Shakespeare’s *King John* is reminiscent of the mourning Virgin of the medieval passion plays. Here Goodland is careful to say that she is more interested in “teasing out the traces of an indigenous social practice of lament” than in establishing “knowledge of particular texts” (122). She also notes that, far from bestowing legitimacy “upon an emergent Christian eschatology,” Shakespeare’s depiction actively dismantles it (123). Certainly Shakespeare has varied the social function of lament, given that the Virgin’s laments (as Goodland argues) served a communal, representational function, whereas the contest in *King John* is “between Constance and everyone else in the world of play, even her son Arthur” (126). Shakespeare may well be inviting a skeptical view of medieval lament. But in this chapter, which focuses far more on the medieval passion plays than on Shakespeare, the comparisons are sometimes strained.

She is on stronger ground in chapter 5, “Mourning and Communal Memory in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*,” though her conclusions are not likely to surprise the many scholars who have noted the ritualistic nature of the women’s laments in this play. Goodland is surely right to note that the Lady Anne’s mourning for Henry VI “includes all of the characteristic features of the genre of ritual lamentation for the dead: the direct address of the corpse, the establishment of kinship, the narrative of the death, and the call for vengeance” (143). The re-bleeding wounds of the dead king’s body and the fact that Margaret’s curses alarm Buckingham do suggest ancient fears of otherworldly vengeance. And Goodland further suggests that epithets like “key-cold” and “pale ashes” may reflect the language of indigenous mourning. From the lamenting women to

the visitation of the dead, *Richard III* suggests a very medieval continuity between the living and the dead.

By the time the reader reaches chapter 6, "Monstrous Mourning Women in Kyd, Shakespeare, and Webster," this continuity is definitely broken; mourning women are "at best impotent, and at worst, dangerous instigators of revenge" (155). Here, in a chapter that covers *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The White Devil*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Lucrece*, Goodland extends the arguments of Michael Neill, Huston Diehl, and Francis Dolan while demonstrating the degree to which these texts reflect public perturbation with demonstrative female mourning. Thus she notes that Francisco's description of Cornelia's mourning in *The White Devil* is unique—the only instance where an onstage audience responds to such mourning with tears of compassion and contrition (169). In all the other instances, mourning is criticized (even by the mourner herself, in *Lucrece*) as excessive, or duplicitous, or dangerous. Female mourning leads men to become revengers, it misleads them, and it even leads Lucrece's relations to wish to imitate her suicide (Brutus intervenes). The tie to indigenous mourning practices is made explicit in *The White Devil* when Brachiano mocks Vittoria's grief by comparing it to the practice of Irish women of keening their dead (158). But perhaps the most interesting analysis in this chapter concerns not the plays named in the chapter title, but *Hamlet*. For in this play, Goodland notes, Laertes and Hamlet offer conflicting examples: Laertes is incited to revenge by his sister's mad mourning, whereas Hamlet himself makes great effort to distinguish his grief from the excessive mourning of the Hecuba-Player (164).

Goodland's interest in *Hamlet* has been apparent in both chapters 5 and 6. In the relatively lengthy chapter she calls "The Gendered Poetics of Tragedy in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," however, she explores both Shakespeare's attraction to medieval female lament, and his simultaneous rejection of it. According to Goodland, there are five representations of mourning women in *Hamlet*, and "in each of these instances, the expression of female grief is contained in some way: it is denounced, dismissed, interrupted, silenced, portrayed as mad, or subsumed by another genre" (171). Yet while Hamlet "succeeds in denouncing and repressing female grief in the first half of the play ... the denouement is driven by women's mourning" (171–72). Having set out the argument, Goodland devotes roughly ten pages to demonstrating that at least some writers of the period linked tragedy in the theater to the vexed funerary activity of the period. She then turns the focus onto Ophelia, whose mourning is allowed to go uninterrupted only in madness leading to death (183). From there she quotes Susan Letzler Cole's observation that the actors twice attempt to perform mourning for the court and are cut off each time. Such interruptions, Goodland argues, register anxiety over both the representation and the audience response.

In her madness, however, Ophelia both curses and blesses the community (197) before uniting it again to mourn at her grave (194). The change in Hamlet, Goodland argues, testifies to the effectiveness of her mourning (198).

The argument of Goodland's last chapter is essentially contained in its title, "Inverting the Pietà in Shakespeare's *King Lear*." In place of the mother mourning her son, we now have a father mourning his daughter. No lamenting woman could howl, rage, interrogate heaven, or wish for death more effectively than Lear himself. The Virgin Mary, Goodland notes, "undergoes a similar arc of emotion." And while she does not call for vengeance, Mary Magdalene does. Parts of this chapter, such as the popularity of monuments and funeral sermons in Elizabethan England, repeat ground covered to varying degrees in several prior chapters. But the section that examines paternal mourning is new, and leads directly to Shakespeare's substitution of male for female tears. In *King Lear*, as Goodland points out, Cordelia's most extensive grief occurs offstage. She "does not speak her grief; first Lear and then the Gentleman speak it for her" (213). But if silent, private grief indicates the sincerity of Cordelia's grief, Lear's grief is given voice, even in the presence of his daughter's body (a feature of Catholic funerals, but not Protestant ones). Michael Neill, noting the lack of ritual consolations in *King Lear*, finds this the logical extension of the Protestant severing of continuity between the living and dead. Goodland, however, argues that Lear's mourning "is haunted by the Virgin's mourning over Jesus" and that this constitutes ritual "for the play in the world" (216). The audience is encouraged to weep with Lear, as medieval mourners once wept with the lamenting women.

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Stefania Taviano. *Staging Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Anglo-American Approaches to Political Theatre*. Warwick Studies in the Humanities. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005. Pp. ix + 136 + 10 color plates. \$79.95.

The larger questions this book trades in moved me to think of two analogies. The first one is between the quality of Fo and Rame's satirical humor and that of another classic author of comedic theater, Molière; the second, between the quality of this humor and the situatedness of political theater. Both analogies are powerful and revealing. The theater practices that bring onstage the historical