

FAMILY PLOT

Lot's Daughters: Sex, Redemption, and Women's Quest for Authority. Robert Polhemus. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

James Walton

In Genesis 19 two angels visit Lot, the only just man in Sodom, to warn him of the judgment on his city. By nightfall his house is surrounded by Sodomites seeking to use the strangers for the satisfaction of their lusts. To prevent such an intrusion on his hospitality, Lot offers the mob his two virgin daughters, but the angels have their own means of defense: they blind the aggressors and deliver Lot and his wife and daughters from the general doom. For violating a divine prohibition against looking back at the burning city, Lot's wife is (famously) turned to a pillar of salt. The survivors take up lodgings in a cave. Believing their father to be the Last Man, Lot's daughters (at the elder one's instigation) make him drunk and seduce him in order to "preserve [his] seed." At this point the present reviewer calls for assistance from "Leda and the Swan": *A shudder in the loins engenders there...* an "alien" people (Moabites), the story of Ruth (intergenerational love *without* incest), the House of David, the nativity of Jesus Christ—a chain of events showing that the daughters' transgression was not only redeemed by its sequel but integral to the greater redemptive drama revealed in scripture and unfolded in history.

Before reviewing the tradition of Jewish, Patristic, and Reformed commentaries on this troublesome text, Polhemus adumbrates his own approach to its enduring and transmogrifying theme with brief discussions of Frances Burney, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Dickens, James, Woolf, Nabokov, and Toni Morrison. Also in Part I, an illustrated chapter on visual representations of the bible story from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century shows how Lot evolves beyond allegorical "type" into "a part of both collective and individual psychology," a "shaper of the imagination in the present tense and the subjective case."

For Polhemus the secularization of Lot-typology begins to appear as early as the ancient tale, "Apollonius of Tyre," interpolated into John Gower's fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis*. Gower's version of the (originally) Greek romance served as source for Shakespeare's (and/or others') *Pericles*. In the play, as in the tale, the theme of incest is displaced upon a wicked king and his daughter. But the hero's words to his lost and recovered child acknowledge a paradoxically carnal union: "O, come hither,/ Thou

that beget'st him that did thee beget." The ungainly speech can be taken as a highly compressed summary of Polhemus's "Lot complex": the daughter takes the initiative in gender-relations, appropriates and transforms her father's "seed"—his authority (*Did she put on his knowledge with his power?*)—and by that act renews both his and the general life.

In the days when critics spoke of "archetypes," daughters like Pericles' Marina, Imogen of *Cymbeline*, and Perdita of *A Winter's Tale* would define the archetypal theme of Heroine-as-Restorer. The Marina of T.S. Eliot inspired a far greater speech than the one ascribed to Shakespeare:

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning
Death
Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning
Death
Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning
Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning
Death
Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place

Eliot's heroine is missing from Polhemus's survey of the modern Lot complex. While satisfying the need for deliverance (from the City of Destruction) and renewal (of an aging patriarch and, implicitly, an aging civilization) her story refines away the transgressive, fleshly nature of father-daughter relations and omits altogether the element of female subjectivity. That last seems the most active ingredient in Polhemus's version of a subversive, reconstructive modern myth. The requirement is met by Austen's Fanny Price, Carroll's Alice, and James's Maisie as centers of consciousness and by Jane Eyre as confessional narrator.

Having contributed substantially, in *Erotic Faith*, to the vast body of Brontë criticism, Polhemus manages to bring fresh light to the darkness of lives and writings unsurpassed for their "courageous [and] painful" illustration of the Lot complex as a "cultural force." The Brontës are foremost among "*women of the last two centuries*" who have "*used imaginative literature...to create the modern world.*" The italics are Polhemus's, and the apparent grandiosity of the claim is balanced by his demand that the celebration of women's achievement include (Yeats again) its violence and bitterness with its greatness. Bertha Rochester, Jane Eyre's monstrous double, figures as the author's *other* shadow in a text that "sets fire to houses of ideological purity and smug colleges of orthodoxy...because it will not suppress...the

fluid instability of desire and the limitless contradictions within self and society.” In *Wuthering Heights*, point of view itself is shattered by a merger of identities between the rebellious daughter and her demon lover, usurper of paternal authority, revealing the “androgynous *savagery* that lies at the core of human love.”

By his own account, Polhemus applies a secular version of Judaeo-Christian hermeneutics to literary and cultural texts. Unlike many of his antecedents, ancient and modern, he disdains the use of allegorical interpretation merely as a device for conjuring away the “dirty” facts. Sometimes incest is incest, as in Mary Shelley’s suppressed *Mathilda* (1819; 1959) and Carolivia Herron’s neglected *Thereafter Johnny* (1991). In Shelley’s novel the Lot complex, like the heroine (neither restorer nor restored), merely withers under the influence of the father’s (unconsummated) love. In *Thereafter*—adapted in part from Joyce’s use of the motif in *Finnegans Wake*—it exfoliates into a wilderness of intertexts. After giving birth to Johnnie, visionary girl-child of incest, the patriarch’s daughter-wife merges (like *Annalivia*) with the river, and the novel moves toward an apocalyptic conclusion, its dense texture dissolving into a cloud of floating signifiers, signifying nothing.

A novel that presents “reality” as insubstantial fabric, phantasmagorical and constructed of language, seems to carry *Lot’s Daughters* into the region of postmodern theory. But not for the first time. One of the merits of Polhemus’s discourse is that he has dwelt unostentatiously in that precinct since about halfway through the book. He might have named his deconstructionist approach to Freud’s “Dora” (*Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*) after the chapter he cites from *Through the Looking -Glass*: “Which Dreamed It?”

Interpretation of Freud’s classic case must prove indeterminate, consisting as it does of an expanding web of subjective responses. Here Polhemus draws attention to his own subjectivity: “The case *I* read [emphasis added] features a pregnant encounter between a leading patriarch of modernity and a representative daughter of the new century, dissatisfied with the past.” His reading provides Dora with the agency and *conscious* subjectivity that Freud’s first-person narrative withholds from her. In the same place he calls on his readers to supply their own revisionist interpretations: “You’re the doctor here as well as Freud, and you see that doctors have hidden agendas—hidden sometimes from themselves.”

Dr. Polhemus’s agenda is oblique but scarcely hidden. Early and late he assumes the role of a contemporary Lot, willing to impart his “seed” to an audience of younger scholars whose preparation would seem to consist in a



full measure of courses in “film,” women’s studies, and popular culture; who have small Shakespeare and less Gower, or Renaissance painting, or traditional hermeneutics. For the diversion of these implied readers Polhemus inadvisedly fashions a series of punning quips from familiar (albeit somewhat dated) movies and songs. The prof’s got a million of ‘em. None will be cited here.

Condescension aside, Polhemus’s fascination with modern America-as-text yields an interesting account of Shirley Temple’s tonic effect on older men and a depressed nation followed by a brilliant study of the life and works of Woody Allen, featuring, of course, Mia Farrow, Soon-Yi Previn, and other components of the several Allen-triangles.

From his book’s beginning Polhemus seems to propose the Lot family’s cave-dwelling as the key to an epistemology of narrative. Plato’s allegory, of course, comes first to mind, then perhaps John Locke’s “Closet, wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or ideas of things without.” The analogy of cave and seat of consciousness gets its richest application in the study of film. Under Allen’s direction, the camera (etymologically linked to Locke’s dark room) can produce, as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a *mise en abîme* where “real” life’s vain appearances, mimetic in themselves, intermingle with their representation on the screen.

Polhemus’s last chapter, on “The Clintons, Lewinsky, and Tripp,” confirms Marx’s dictum that “all great, world-historical facts and person-ages occur...twice.... the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Risking bathos, he gives Chelsea Clinton the last word. The speech anticipates, and internalizes, her father’s humane response to the atrocities of September 11: Heroine as (Potential) Restorer.

Polhemus uses Chelsea’s painful case as a final demonstration of the argument (*contra* Oedipus) that “destiny is with daughters as well as sons.” In *Lot’s Daughters* he has succeeded in providing future critics with a supplement, or alternative, to Freud’s masterplot.

