
David Lee Miller. *Dreams of the Burning Child: Sacrificial Sons and the Father's Witness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. 239p.

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The idea that animates Miller's book follows from the work of the anthropologist Nancy Jay. She proposes that tribal societies resolve "the formal embarrassment of fatherhood's inability to represent itself" through the practice of common sacrifices as the bond between father and son (2). Miller develops Jay's hypothesis to suggest that the sacrifice that makes the invisible bond between father and son concrete is a human sacrifice, that of the son. He traces the idea from its biblical sources in the *aqedah*, the story of Abraham and Isaac; through the Gospels, in which an invisible God sacrifices his Son; and then through four texts: the *Aeneid*, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Dombey and Son*, which, as Miller points out, are "hypercanonical" (9) in their centrality to humanist culture and which occur at points, like the Reformation, of powerful and irreversible shifts in European culture.

Miller writes:

The most ambitious literary texts ... reflect on the technologies employed by their cultures to "interpellate" the social subject. In this sense, such works are not only post-sacrificial, they are meta-sacrificial: they open up for scrutiny the role played by sacrificial myth in organizing the repertoire of fantasies that guide desiring subjects toward their places in the social order. (7-8)

In the *Aeneid* Miller detects an internal critique of the demands and costs of patriarchal empire. He links *Hamlet* and *The Winter's Tale* as a continuing investigation of the father's destruction of the child, one in which the later play adapts the earlier one by reforming the patriarch. In his treatment of both plays Miller looks closely at the institution of the theater itself and at its investment, during the controversies of the Reformation, as the site of public ritual that replaces the altar, with the important difference that the audience is no longer united by a common understanding of that ritual. Autolycus, the disreputable character who enables the happy ending of *The Winter's Tale*, becomes for Miller the link between the play and the deceptive arts of the theater and thus counterpoises the staging of a miracle. Miller's account of *Dombey and Son* extends the historical pursuit of subjectivity through genre by playing Dickens' novel off against Victorian evangelical tracts in a way that exposes the differences between their claims to truth and the contingent truth of the novel.

Along the way he refers to other texts and to images as points of reference, including Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica and a funny and touching photomontage that juxtaposes the head of an elderly man with the body of a little boy

in a sailor suit, a literal embodiment of the *puer senex*, which figures among the constellation of motifs to which Miller returns throughout the book. *Dreams of the Burning Child* also includes essays on Jonson; Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* provides the title; Lacan; and Achebe. It's appropriate that this book, with its interest in reversals of time that unite maturity and boyhood, fathers and sons, and in fathers' reflections in their precocious progeny, should conclude, rather than begin, with the kind of theorization that usually appears in introductions, "repeating Freud's symptomatic gesture of delay" (187).

Miller engages a complex structure to differentiate his approach from that of mythological criticism, with its dependence on the postulation of a collective unconscious. He is less interested in the "personal unconscious of the unknown dreamer" than in "the sacrificial economy of patriarchy, which operates in the Western cultural tradition as a distinct, semiautonomous system, shaping and informing individual subjects" (140) and which results in "the persistent clustering of . . . motifs" (211). "Feminism," Miller writes, "has demonstrated the debilitating consequences for women in a culture that defines them as their bodies; I would stress the debilitating consequences for men in a culture that defines them against their bodies" (47). For a father in that culture,

a patrilineal patriarchy authorized by a paternal deity, the son both makes him a father and shows him that he cannot be the father. To be a father in the patriarchal tradition is to bear witness to the destruction of the son and to see in his death at once the essence and the destruction of fatherhood itself. (170)

Like other theoretical works, Miller's book functions as an imaginative structure and does so quite beautifully. The readings are subtle, and, although never easy, they are not tenuous. Miller however wants to do more than to theorize: looking towards practice, he sees his book as the first step in an ongoing interdisciplinary project of liberation from sacrificial patriarchy that would eventually dethrone the transcendental signifier. Although Blake is absent from his wide-ranging book, Miller's work uncannily figures Blake's paternal bogey Nobodaddy, for instance in its reference to mommadaddy, Miller's son's name for the undifferentiated pre-Oedipal parent (192), and in Miller's meditation on nothing as the "immensely productive force" to which patriarchy gives "an ideologically specific determination as *the body of fatherhood*" (51). Miller aspires to knowledge of "ourselves in relation not to the Other, but to others" (222), a project for which he supplies an architectural analogy in the Mandell Weiss Forum on the campus of the University of California at San Diego (219-221). Miller's project is at least as visionary as the withering away of gender and in Miller's view inseparable from the latter: "to undo the cruelties of the past by going back to seek within it an internal resistance

to the ritual sacrifice of human life” (206) as Achebe does in Miller’s reading of *Things Fall Apart*. Blake, as well as Milton (206-208), is a precursor, and I join the readers whose response to the book is: “What about X?”, and to whom Miller’s response is in turn: “¡No más! ¡No más!” (x), by suggesting as the next step an investigation of Romanticism. ✱