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Review by Sean Benson

Quilligan, Maureen. *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*. State College: Pennsylvania UP, 2005. 296 pages.

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Quilligan's erudite book begins, "We have been taught by feminist scholarship that women are constrained by family structures; we have taken this as a foundational principle of arguments for the liberation of women." What Quilligan adds to this presumption of guilt is that, among aristocratic women, family rank could empower them. In addition to the usual reasons—better education opportunities, etc.—Quilligan argues that incest, real or imagined in literature, potentially offers such women agency by "halting the traffic of women." She follows Lévi-Strauss's argument that the incest taboo was instituted "to extend," in her words, "patriarchal alliances across social groups by making a bond between men." Incest thus frustrates this trade in women, and for this alleged reason has been proscribed. Quilligan asserts that incest is one way to halt such trafficking, but historically, as she is no doubt aware, incest has often served to give a father or brother sexual access to a daughter or sister. What Quilligan has to overcome, then, is the evidence that incest is seldom (if ever) freely chosen and that it is harmful to women (and men) rather than potentially liberating. If one accepts both the premise that the traditional family, with its expectations of exogamous sexual unions, constrains women, and Lévi-Strauss's anthropological reading of incest, then her argument follows.

Quilligan traces a number of books written by women who, in her view, "claim an active female authority" by defying the male trade in women and substituting in its place incest tropes. She begins with Henry VIII's incest problems in his marriages, which Quilligan ingeniously connect to Elizabeth's status as the child of an incestuous union, and to her *Glass of the Sinful Soul* (a translation of a work by Marguerite of Navarre), which she presented in a lovely embroidered copy to Katherine Parr. The text contains tropes of "holy incest," which Quilligan, following the work of Marc Shell, reads in Freudian terms, not entirely

successfully, but her treatment of the publication history of the work during Elizabeth's lifetime is both intriguing and informative. Similarly, her careful reading of parallels between Britomart's social and marital situation with those of Elizabeth is nicely nuanced and sheds light on the tensions between active female agency and the early modern demands of matrimony.

She next argues compellingly that the frontispiece to Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Mountomeries Urania*, which is modeled on her aunt Mary Herbert's revision of her more famous uncle Philip's romance, is "a picture of the kinship from which Wroth draws her endogamous power." The engraving emphasized the land as both the site of their family power as well as the connection—rootedness—that unites the family, which carries over into her revision of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (whose title she borrowed) as well as the masculine romances of Spenser and Virgil. Quilligan is at her best when she examines the Sidney-Essex-Leicester faction, both in their endogamous marriages and relationships (Philip and sister Mary were, as Aubrey reports, rumored to be lovers) and in their attempts to advise Elizabeth on her prospective marriages. Her reading of Mary Sidney Herbert's work on the psalms she and Philip translated together is especially rewarding, especially her claim that Mary's literary "identification with her brother was a means to create" her own authorial agency.

Quilligan opens and closes the book with an examination of incest in *King Lear*, in particular her claim that Cordelia changes from one who initially refuses (like Milton's Eve) the incest taboo into one whose active, invading agency at the end of the play embraces Lear's allegedly incestuous "fantasy." In refusing to love Lear "all," as her sisters do at the outset, Cordelia rejects their own allegedly incestuous posturing. This is not so much argued as assumed; why, for instance, is Goneril and Regan's overblown rhetoric an expression of incestuous desire rather than of (specious) filial love? Cordelia dies, Quilligan also argues, for ideological reasons: for having transgressed (in returning to Lear) "against the passivity required by the proper traffic in women." Who exactly "punishes her with death" (Shakespeare, God, her culture with its "compulsory heterosexuality") is not clear.

Considered individually, the essays generally work. Collectively, despite the numerous homosocial and endogamous connections Quilligan makes, they never quite cohere in making

the case that incest confers or was thought to confer agency on these women, or that the female authors of these works embrace the possibility of incest as enthusiastically as Quilligan suggests. Endogamy is one thing; incest, quite another.

*Sean Benson*