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**AN APOLOGIA PRO OPERA SUA:
SAM SHEPARD VS THE FEMININE
OR HOW A “A FOOL FOR LOVE” MEETS “THE SILENT
TONGUE(S)” AND FINDS IT ALL TO BE
A HUGE “LIE OF THE MIND”**

Abstract: *Drama is not a favourite genre among American critics and it has been so for decades. Misogyny (or what might appear similar to it) has also grown out of fashion, hopefully for good. The combination of the two makes it all the more difficult for an author to “fare well” among the critics. My paper tries to highlight the fact that Sam Shepard, although often perceived as a misogynist for the treatment of his female characters both by his “men” and himself is not (as much) “guilty as charged”. The point I am trying to make is that the playwright did not (always) ignore his female characters and leave them voiceless because it pleased him to do so. He did it because what he understood best about the human condition was male anxiety and neurosis.*

A Lie of the Mind is his, albeit failed, attempt at understanding the female side and even incorporating it. What the play offers as a conclusion is that love seems to be a mission that is impossible for the strong and the healthy. It tries to persuade the reader (and this attitude can frequently be found explicitly in his plays) that love is a(n) unnatural condition, an illness of a sort. Love is a survival mode for the weak. The strong do not need it. On this not very encouraging note the play ends, as do all Shepard's further attempts at dealing with women characters in a way different from his usual.

Keywords: *drama, America, Sam Shepard, women, Lie of the Mind*

Drama is far from being a favorite America's child, but interestingly enough, Sam Shepard was long America's golden boy of sorts. His rugged good looks and the pensive, even melancholy air he sported added a fine touch of a Byronic aura to him. He too was an exile, but not for too long and unlike the 19th century British eccentric and Romantic (the capital r is, it seems to me, only fitting here, for the English lord was not very much into a notion of love we commonly tend to consider romantic) he was not forced to leave. In the case of the latter it was rather a

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self-exile to the homeland of the former. Young Shepard simply decided he had had enough of being an infant-prodigy-stardom and a tumultuous love affair with Patti Smith only sped his itchy feet. His couple of years in England, where he tried to pursue a career as a rock band's drummer, yielded more plays; among which is one on a gambling mafia (where English gentlemen's greyhounds predictably, but wisely, were replaced by cowboy horses) and another on the hostile punk rock scene of the 1970s featuring a matinee cowboy-style final showdown: *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974) and *Tooth of Crime* (1972), respectively. The years in England might have helped him to make a final decision on which career path to take: that of a playwright and occasional actor in movies (that, not unlike his own plays, featured an anxiety-plagued White male as the precise kind of man that ladies love to save from themselves, which is a venture needless to say, rarely successful).

Some years back, I started spending a considerable amount of time doing research on Sam Shepard, having reference books and his plays shipped to me from the States so that I could ponder on both his idiosyncrasy and his indebtedness to Postmodernism. In my PhD thesis, he was more or less successfully paired with David Mamet, yet another male playwright and one who writes almost exclusively for males. Saying that Sam Shepard is a playwright concerned mostly with WASP anxieties is no breakthrough in humanities. From a distance, the American literary scene seemed a bit abstract, albeit charted in a way that put whatever you call postmodern(ist) first and foremost. It is one thing to read American drama scholars (Harris Smith, Schroeder)² trying to figure out why drama is placed so lowly in the canon and another to hear a distinguished drama scholar say that she's never bothered to care about what anxious American male baby boomers have felt urged to say about their anxieties from the hippie times onwards. Although it will hardly make changes to Sam Shepard's life or status on this earth and much less in the literary canon, that was a moment when I felt sorry for him and his often discussed anxiety-combined-with-masculinity issues.

² "Unless you want to write on Eugene O'Neill, there really isn't any American dram[...] American drama is still regarded as the illegitimate offspring of an unholy union between misguided American writers and the commercial stage" (Schroeder 1991, 420-427).

And what better apology than love can ever exist? If Dr Roof had had to choose a single phrase to describe Shepard's oeuvre, then that of "male anxieties" would have been a choice nothing short of perfect. Her outright dismissal of his entire opus was what bothered me. And it is precisely because I agree with the distinguished professor that we are free to choose who to read and write about, that I allow myself to be subjective as it comes to the choice of the author whose expression of love I wish to expand on in my modest contribution to drama scholarship.

I believe my paper will show that Sam Shepard was not disinterested in the topic, not only because some women referred to the author as a "thinking women's beefcake" or due to the string of beautiful women he's been romantically involved with during his struggle with the above-mentioned anxieties, but because he has contemplated and written about love in his works and the fact that his love(rs) failed does not change the truth of the fact they tried.

To be fair to the playwright, romantic love is not the only kind of love he writes about. His plays, themselves varied in content, theme and style (from the early 1960s very experimental one-acts to the full-length kitchen-sink family plays of the late 1970s and early 1980s) feature prominently parental, filial and sibling love and devotion, or rather their flip side. Much has been written on the Oedipal concerns highlighted in his Father-Son relationship plays, the type of strained relationship which hovers menacingly over many of his plays (*The Rock Garden*, *The Holy Ghostly*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, *Lie of the Mind*, *The Late Henry Moss*) and the semblance it bears to his own troubled relationship with his drunk veteran father living in the desert.

Scholars often dwell on the biographical details of Shepard's life and, as often happens when dealing with a living author, resort to interviews trying to sift through what might be termed as "literary intelligence". Thus, they hope, digging through both the conscious and the unconscious of the author, that they will eventually come across a golden thread which will then generate loads of scholarly papers. Carol Rosen wrote a poetic biography, Don Shewey did a lot of writing in the same vain, then Martin Tucker and, to some extent, Matthew Roudané, not to mention countless interviews in papers and magazines. Shepard's celebrity image was further perpetuated by the fact he

“hated” journalists and paparazzi, just as a true star should. In a 1986 interview, Shepard described a hawk he had once observed in New Mexico trying to outfly bothersome crows. The interviewer, Jonathan Cott, rightly supposed that Shepard identified with the hawk and asked, “So the answer is to outfly them.” Shepard responded, “Yeah, outfly them. Avoid situations that are going to take pieces of you. And hide out” (Blackburn 2009) The celebrity cult(ure) is so much with us today that it is easy to imagine how such a statement (and the attitude it stemmed from) would only attract more attention to the one not wanting it. However, Sam Shepard was in his artistic prime at the time and probably not aware of the fact that he had already written his best plays and had been in a steady decline (at least according to the later critics of his work).

A year prior to the interview, he wrote the last of his family plays, arguably not the best of them, *A Lie of the Mind*. Although, there is critical consensus about his *Buried Child* (1978) and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) being the best of Shepard the 1985 play is important as in it Shepard tries hard (and fails according to some) to speak the language of women. Some claim that Shepard's is an “emotional territory” (Rosen 2004) and by this play he ventured into a territory yet unknown, also emotional, but in a female kind of way. Others believe that Shepard was under pressure (both external and intrinsic) to give voice to the “silent tongues” of his female characters. Although not many of Shepard's plays are without female characters, his women fell into a couple of marginal categories: inadequate and frustrated nurturers (Lisa and Lupe in *Action*, Halie in *Buried Child*, Lorraine and Meg in *A Lie of the Mind*), equally inadequate and frustrated companions (Shelly in *Buried Child*, Joy in *Chicago*) and ghosts (Consuela in *Eyes for Consuela*).

Therefore, not that women were absent from his plays – they revolved and floated around men in a way that showed not misogyny as it is too easy to (wrongly) conclude but the fact that the playwright hardly knew what to make of them. He was too absorbed in his masculine fears and anxieties to pay any attention to those of the gentler sex. Bonnie Marranca (1981) perceives his female characters as stereotyped, stuck in prescribed gender roles, often ancillary ones. They are never outside the framework made by men and for men – mothers and sisters, girlfriends and wives, maids and secretaries, never

existing in their own right. Some critics go even further to define this “curious passivity” (Falk 1981, 99) to be a survival tool nature generously provided to females. They resort to the evolutionary adaptation tool of the weaker ones – mimicry. When in crisis, they act as if nothing is wrong or like eager-to-please children (Ibid, 98) so as to minimize risk for their own safety. While in peril, they would start simple activities (scrubbing floors, doing laundry, preparing food) to just go through the day or whatever time it takes for things to get back to normal, whatever this normal be on Shepard’s stage:

SHELLEY (to Vince in *Buried Child*) (cutting carrots) Sure. I’m fine. I’ll just keep real busy while you’re gone (Shepard 1984, 98).

Some say that one needs to understand something (or somebody) to love it and some say that is precisely the other way round: if you love something you will try to understand it. Shepard the playwright seemed not to understand women, so when he decided to write a play on love, in the course of the play he even tried to concoct a special language to it, or rather to show that love cannot be expressed through an ordinary language of everyday matters. Unfortunately, the language he deploys is broken, shattered, incoherent and slurred just like the character who uses it. There were heterosexual couples (Shepard, in fact, likes pairs on his stage, but these pairs are more Beckettian than romantic even if they seem to be so) in other Shepard’s plays (notably *Chicago*, *Red Cross*, *La Turista*, *Operation Sidewinder*, *Cowboy Mouth* etc.) but the female characters were, as was said before, predominantly foils to anxious males. Critics might rightfully argue that Beth was, again, a somewhat better developed foil for Jake, but even if it is so, after *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard cannot be accused of not trying to deal successfully with a female mind, only of failing. And the mind is here in the center of the play, both literally and metaphorically. The story is not very peculiar to Shepard or anyone in general. Domestic violence is, unfortunately, a very frequent trope both in life and literature. In the case of the play, a jealous husband, Jake, has severely beaten his wife, Beth, and some damage has been done to her brain. This is why she is unable to come to terms either with her own gender identity or the future of her relationship with Jake.

After beating his spouse, Jake fled, having mistaken her for dead. But she is not dead. Only brain damaged. The play starts with the two houses on the two opposite parts of the stage, one representing Jake's mother's house in California and the other Beth's folks' home in Montana. Shepard's characters are somehow all impotent in family matters; establishing any meaningful relationship other than one that is purely sexual is next to impossible. When a couple is bound for life in Shepard, then it is about incest (*Fool for Love*)! And even then we are tempted to believe the two are a metaphorical replacement for a long sought-for androgynous union. They are "siblings" after all. Back to Beth and Jake, they are both in their respective families of origin, which are (what a surprise) also dysfunctional. Both houses are full of sound and fury, door-slamming, plate-smashing, even shooting and it all signifies nothing. Shrouded in their different pathologies like in blankets (another favorite Shepard's trademark/symbol/metaphor) the families lick their wounds and blame it all on the other(s). How else could it be? It can't be "us", can it? After having spent some time with his Mom and sister in California (literally) dusting off his father's ashes from under the bed, Jake finally musters some courage and goes to Montana to face his wife and his love. And his demons. Mother (Lorraine) is in denial. She is, in fact, repating the same pattern with her son which seemed not to have worked with his Dad. She feeds him soup and dotes on him while he regresses back to the behavior of a pre-school boy. Lorraine is happy having him back so that she can re-exercise her parental role, while at the same time admitting to seeing him more like a puppy suddenly grown dangerous than like an adult son:

"He's not gonna hurt us. We're related. Look at him. He's just a big baby. [...] Strangers he'll hurt. Stranger women. Outsiders he'll hurt. That's guaranteed. But not us. He knows us" (Shepard 1996, 33).

Denial is a powerful weapon when people want to deceive – themselves. *A Lie of the Mind* plays with the mind(s) of all of the characters deceiving them, deluding them and playing dirty tricks on them. Or is it their own minds which do it to them, paradoxically trying to protect them from pain-memory?

The plot (unlike many Shepard's plays, *A Lie of the Mind* has one) evolves around the possibility of reconciliation; first of all with the self, which can only be done after having reconciled with one's past, and (only) then with others. Past and (family) history are again important Shepard's tropes. Jake tries. He asks for pardon. He goes through humiliation and even gets metaphorically emasculated. It seems to be enough for pardon but not enough for getting back together. But Jake does not hope for anything more than. And Beth, it seems, holds no rancour towards him. They both are strangely serene and somehow solemnly dignified despite the undignified way they look on the stage in the strangest of attires possible (Jake is draped in an American flag only in one moment, and on all fours dragged on leash by her violent brother). Her derranged brains opened some new vistas to Beth. This is how human brain/body functions and it is the same with all things human. A simple law of physics:

“If something breaks – broken. If something broken – parts still – stay. Parts still float. For a while. Then gone. Maybe never come – back. Together. Maybe never” (Ibid, 53).

The power of forgetting seems to defeat the power of love in the play. The power of forgiveness is the only equally powerful force in the play. Beth forgives Jake, Jake forgives himself (some would say too easily). There is an ominous, almost Poeian “never”, repeated twice in Beth's lines, but there is also a maybe. And it is at this note of a possibility, however small, that in my opinion the play ends.

It is almost bad taste to try to define love anywhere, much less in a single paper but we can trace some of the phenomena connected with any male-female romantic involvement and their manifestations in the play.

Betrayal/abandonment is one of those but is never called that in the play. It is denoted with a simple, innocuous word “leaving” and it is a pronouncedly male “device” in a relationship. Women characters in the play refer repeatedly to this male need trying to understand it. The whole play is a treatise on gendered emotions, gendered space and (reconciling) gender differences. Role reversal, literally entering the other's shoes or inhabiting their space is a way towards understanding the other and possible reconciliation. Knowing could lead to loving, just as

ignorance and fear of the unknown is what causes xenophobia and different intolerable “isms”.

Lorraine and Sally, *do* try to understand (SALLY My whole body shakes from the memory of all this leavin’ (Shepard 1996, 72); LORRAINE Is there any good reason in this Christless world why men leave women? (Ibid, 93)) but it is not that women are without guilt for men’s condition(s). How could they know and tolerate the traits in them which are animalistic if nor brutish (LORRAINE He’s like a stray dog. He’s home for a while and you pet him and feed him and he licks your hand and then he’s gone again” (Shepard 1996, 93)) Even though not as drastically as some other Shepard’s mothers (the incestuous Halie in *Buried Child*) Lorraine still enjoys her privileged position in her son’s heart and, if not encourages, then certainly justifies his lousy treatment of his “bimboes”. Shepard’s “sons and lovers” unlike Laurence’s are much more invested in hatred towards their fathers than in love for their mothers. The power of Eros within their Oedipal is subordinated to that of Tanatos. The destructive defeats the incestuous, and one might even argue, the creative.

However, when they finally come to terms with the “leaving”, the female household in California decides to let go of it altogether. The male sanctuary, the place of their perpetual but never final return(s) is set on fire. The women decided to leave. The male power is in their hands now and the piles of trash and dust heaped over years as the men’s pledge of return are abandoned to flames, the Father’s funeral pyre of sorts: his pilot jacket, his model planes, his war medals and his very ashes. The macho paraphernalia are grotesquely piled up here to challenge, or better still, mock male myths which are further challenged through the characters of Beth’s father and his son Mike who set out with shotguns and in full hunter’s outfits to hunt for deer whose meat no one eats. The futility of the “male” tasks, a complete absence of the need for initiation leaves a 20th century American without mission, he knows he is bound to some destination, somewhere out there, but where exactly?

The men are frustrated with the aimlessness of their quest(s) which might well have generated the initial violence of the play as well as all the rest of it but the women are upset too. We have seen how two of them made use of the male weapon of abandonment to sever the ties with the past. But what about those who are more domestic or more into home-making like

Meg and Beth herself? Some short-term gender role reversal was needed here coupled with a desirable degree of male vulnerability. Beth appears in a man's shirt demonstrating, however awkwardly and seemingly inadvertently some kind of domination over immovable Frankie on the couch. It is not only Beth's (hopefully temporarily) deranged mind which prompts her to talk about herself as a "shirt-man" – it is more of a search for gender balance. Men, as Beth knows them, are aggressive and dangerous and they flee. Women, as Beth is taught to believe, are submissive and docile and, if necessary, seductive (hence she dons the overly appealing clothes when she wants to propose to Frankie). The only way to secure a warm nest is to make some slight changes to these roles as we know them. The shirt performance was part of the ritual and the fact that Frankie is wounded and immobile, thus vulnerable and incapable of violence or leaving is the complementary part.

The situation onstage sinks gradually into a well-known Shepardesque confusion. To stay true to himself and his male characters, Shepard "chases" an incorrigibly masculine Mike off and abandons the stage to the two self-absorbed, autistic couples. Beth might not find it too difficult to coerce Frankie into staying with her, especially if one recalls what Jake said earlier in the play about a certain fondness Frankie had always felt for his sister in law. Meg and Baylor, similar to the characters of an earlier Shepard's play – *Action*, find meaning in performing simple activities which they turn into a ritual of a sort. Shepard has always had a thing for rituals (*La Turista*, *Back Bog Beast Bite*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *Eyes for Consuela*) although these have never proved either healing or catarsic. It is yet one more of his exemplary postmodernist traits: make use of something to no traceable end (in terms of a play's structure). Personal and familiar is, in Shepard, never too far from national: he seems never to get tired of the appropriation of the American flag. There must be something charged with symbolism in the ritual of its folding and insisting on its being proper so as to "have all the stars on the outside and all the stripes tucked in" (Shepard 1996, 136). There are (at least) two deaths in the play and it is appropriate to fold the flag not only in memory of Jake's dead father but also as a wordless obituary to Beth and Jake's love. Shepard's men cling desperately to something known and

knowable, something stable and constant in a pervading context of non-recognition and disappearing:

BETH "Your whole life can turn around. Upside down. In a flash. Sudden. [...] The whole world can disappear. Everything you know can go. You won't even recognize your own hands." (Ibid, 87).

BAYLOR You don't recognize the flag anymore? It's the same color it always was. They haven't changed it, have they? Maybe added a star or two but otherwise it's exactly the same. How could you not recognize it?" (Ibid, 128-9).

Shepard's has never been a lukewarm patriot, quite the contrary. His patriotism is of a higher kind than that of Whitman and Ginsberg and there is no wonder this WWII pilot's son and 60's youth leaves some space on his stage for his native land. The image of America in his plays is not always flattering but neither is that of the nuclear family and still it is precisely family matters that haunt Shepard most of all and that he keeps harkening back to. Pairing these two tropes is no coincidence: both of them, the family and the nation seem to need reinvention, remaking, restructuring.

For some time already, readers and theatre goers have stopped looking for closure, let alone catharsis. Trying to find a message would be preposterous. What I was trying to understand is how the family conflict is (un)resolved in the end. And what (if anything) has love to do with it.

One way of reading the play would be that that only if/when we admit to both the feminine and the masculine sides to us (if there are such things) and break out of the entrenched stereotypes can we hope for establishing meaningful relationships with other people based on more than simply biological laws on either sex or kinship. But, then, why is it that only the vulnerable ones are capable of sharing space? The two men are both disabled – one is too old and weak even to untie his own boots and the other is young but wounded and couch-ridden. Both women suffer from dementia. The other two men, the strong and young ones, leave. The two enlightened women also leave setting their belongings virtually aflame. Is it what we can read from the play? That love and charity is what is left to the

meek and the weak since the strong and the proud do not need it? Or, worse yet, are incapable of maintaining it?

The ending of the last of the family cycle plays is unsatisfactory. While the strong move on alone, the impotent stay at home (for a while) to help one another survive through each one's respective solitudes. If they were not vulnerable, they would never make it. Shepard composed his own "songs of fire and ice" in the play's ending. Fire and (in the) snow exist simultaneously in the final scene as yet another symbol of the family paradox(es) in Shepard. They merge in Meg's mind's eye as if to suggest that it is possible for people of different ilk to coexist and even raise a family. They can also mean purification, a fresh start, a new beginning.

The new beginning, if there is one, implies a painful negotiation of traditional roles as we know them. They are no more gendered, or at least not so in a simple way. Gender is challenged multiple times and (ex)changed among Beth and Frankie. The-man-of-the-family stereotype is first mercilessly ridiculed (deer hunting, shooting Frankie instead of an animal, Jake's retreat in his Mom's home), then dismantled and finally reassembled in such a way that no one is sure he is any longer functional. There is only one type of harmless family men – those who depend on others. The humor of the fighting-over-the-blanket scene with Baylor and Frankie hovers over the underlying sense of profound desperation of the two impotent men resorting pathetically to a frustrated and futile toddler-like imitation of violence. A blanket and a bottle are Shepard's favorite scene props along with a fridge and a couch. They all suggest nourishment, shelter, the domestic but also the domesticated. Shepard's men huddle themselves in blankets as the final shield against the chill of the outside. The blanket is never even neutral a symbol: its symbolism is always dark, that of (existential) fever-sickness, denial, catatonic numbness and death (Dodge in *Buried Child*, Carter in *Simpatico*). Therefore, love is reduced to simple nourishment and the men's needs to those of a pre-pubescent age. Can such a family union produce anything but a "buried child"?

On the other hand, the young and the strong are destructive both to themselves and to others. Sex and progeny seem to be of little importance compared to violence although there are numerous allusions to sex throughout the text of the

play. What Shepard points out is that the traditional family failed, but offers no healthy replacement. The surrogate we encounter in the final scenes is a far cry from what one would like to call home.

As for the non-disabled women of the play, Sallie and Lorraine, the only way they can escape men is become them (metaphorically) and learn and accept their ways. Contrary to Baylor and Frankie who are to some extent feminized so as to fit in the domestic space of the inside, the ladies choose to reject the men (that is, the memories of the men) whom they have been rejected by. They make use of a typically male weapon in this gender war – leaving. The contrast between the fire in their California home and the snow-shrouded house in Montana brings together the conflicting principles, that of fire – dynamism and energy, but also destruction and that of snow, i.e. peace but also passivity and apathy, frustration and imprisonment.

It does not seem that any of the characters resolved their internal conflicts successfully. By the end they will just have made a conscious choice to bury the past. There is, however, one significant difference between the leaving men and women. The women leave together since, as it is hinted in the play, the female principle needs the other, and the men each on his own since no one, themselves included, knows what they are after. What they are leaving behind is much clearer – the danger of permanent emasculation and “enslavement”.

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