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Emily Sun, *Succeeding King Lear: Literature, Exposure, and the Possibility of Politics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.

English Romantic reception of *King Lear* is an important part of Shakespeare's afterlife. Emily Sun's book investigates Anglo-American post-Romanticist readings and appropriations of *Lear* as a seminal text on the relationship between literature and politics, specifically succession as a philosophical and political issue in British Romanticism and American modernism. Sun suggests that *King Lear* helps William Wordsworth, journalist James Agee, and photographer Walker Evans articulate their anxieties about literary representation and political successions. The Introduction announces that the book intends to show how Wordsworth, Agee, and Evans become successors to *Lear* when they turn to the play as a source of inspiration as they grapple with questions of sovereignty and the relationship between literature and politics.

Succeeding King Lear begins with a chapter on sovereignty and *King Lear*, devotes two chapters to Wordsworth, and concludes with a fourth and the final chapter on Agee and Evans. Writing *The Borderers* in 1797, Wordsworth sets his play on a heath. Herbert's lines echo those of *Lear*'s, and Herbert's relationship with Matilda bears resemblance to that between *Lear* and Cordelia. The play also contains echoes of *Iago*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. Fast forward to 1941: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a work of documentary journalism with photos by Evans and text by Agee, reframes the lives of cotton tenant farmers in the American South during the Depression for public consumption and private reflection on what it means to be a spectator. Sun finds cursory links between that work and *Lear* in Agee's and Evans's epigraphs that quote the disillusioned former monarch on the heath. The chapters on Sun's own interpretation of the crisis of succession in *Lear* and the first chapter on Wordsworth are more successful.

Chapter one examines *King Lear*'s "unrelenting and cruel probing of spectatorship" (Sun 2010, 11). This long chapter suggests that *Lear* yearns for an unattainable form of freedom: freedom from the burden of the political realm. Sun notes that "freedom so conceived does not take place *between* men, in a realm of human affairs where human beings speak and act with each other to decide the affairs and interests they have in common. Rather . . . freedom so conceived simulates the freedom enjoyed by God or gods" (18, emphasis in original). It is therefore *Lear*'s mistake to harbor such transgressive desire. While not entirely conversant with current scholarship on *Lear* or Shakespeare studies, this chapter nonetheless offers some interesting points for consideration in interpreting

the tragedy. Cordelia's defiant reply of "nothing" to her father is destructive because it "exposes the limits of sovereignty" (21). As Sun argues, "the 'nothing' that she speaks insists on something radically in excess of any political realm defined as such, an excess that keeps any kingdom from closing in on and completing itself as a whole . . ." (21). Cordelia's "nothing" demolishes the knowable political realm in favor of an as-yet unknowable world of human conditions, thereby "set[ing] into motion the protagonist's and the play's departure from the closed realm of ritual into the uncertain world of theater" (23).

Chapter two focuses on the heath in *Lear*. First, Sun interprets *The Borderers* as an autobiographical text that "puts the very relationship between autobiography and politics fundamentally in question" (83). Building on the critical understanding of the play as an autobiography that sheds light on Wordsworth's political position, Sun argues that the play also complicates the politics of autobiography. Drawing heavily on Hannah Arendt's theories, Sun argues that Wordsworth juxtaposes characters' autobiographies (especially of Herbert, Rivers, and Mortimer) in *The Borderers* to open up the possibility for "autobiography-in-the-plural, a way of enacting one's life story that is non-sovereign but exposed to human plurality" (102). Wordsworth "succeed[s] King Lear," not only by "succeed[ing] the play," but by succeeding "where the play's characters fail" (102). This is especially true in Wordsworth's re-envisioning of the heath, which is "a site of exposure, a barren, inhospitable place that, in juridical-political terms, is a *non-place* between the sovereign jurisdictions of England and Scotland" (106, emphasis in original). It is Mortimer's refusal to "tell his own story" that turns the heath into "the site of an 'exposure beybeyond exposure,'" writes Sun. By refusing to create his own autobiography (and thereby leaving it for the reader to determine), Mortimer opens up the possibility of an unstructured community that "emerges in the readers' radical exposure to the life stories of others" (107). It is unclear, however, what the payoff is in this chapter. The significance of Wordsworth's interpretation of *Lear* remains tangential.

Chapter three analyzes Wordsworth's 1798 poem, "The Discharged Soldier." The poem narrativizes an exposure to the "unassimilable alterity" of the other — in this case, the eponymous soldier, who is notably "indifferen[t] to the company of others" and resists Wordsworth's "attempts to mediate for him" (112, 122). As we wade deeper into *Succeeding King Lear*, we begin to wonder why *Lear* and Shakespeare are advertised prominently in the book's title and introduction, when chapters such as this do not seem to have a place in the book.

Chapter four leaps two centuries and turns to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a unique case of documentary journalism, or what Sun calls an "unpredictable, idiosyncratic, and extravagant" work (127). Most of the chapter uses a cultural studies approach to analyze Agee and Evans's joint

enterprise. *King Lear* has all but receded to a distant background. One tangential connection to *Lear* might be located, as Sun writes in the Introduction, in the ways in which Evans show "how his subjects see — that is, he *exposes to the viewer his seeing of another's seeing*" and how Agee, in his writing, discloses his shame of being "exposed to the unassimilable shame of the other, who is, equally yet commensurably, like him actor and spectacle in the world among others" (6-7, emphasis in original). Commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to report on the cotton farmers, Agee and Evans reinvent their assignment. Instead of reporting on the farmers from their journalistic perspective, Agee and Evans wish to "unwork" the prevailing societal conception of division of labor and the discourse of "us" versus "them."

Sun's reading of the texts and judicial analysis of their respective historical contexts are admirable, and the book is wonderfully ambitious. However, the connections, if any, between Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and — out of the blue — Agee and Evan are not articulated and taken productively to task. The chapter on American documentary journalism would have been a wonderful journal article. There are moments when one wonders if the book is not a monograph but a collection of intriguing seminar papers, because there is no concluding chapter and the book does not seem to achieve what the Introduction promises. The prose is generally clear, though it is marred by repetition of entire sentences and clauses. The vast historical gap and leap remain baffling.

References

Sun, Emily. 2010. *Succeeding King Lear: Literature, Exposure, and the Possibility of Politics*.
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