

GWYNNE KENNEDY: JUST ANGER: REPRESENTING WOMEN'S ANGER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND. Carbondale/Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press 2000, 162 S.

The publisher's jacket blurb tells us that Gwynne Kennedy, who teaches English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is the »first scholar to investigate thoroughly the subject of women's anger in early modern England.« Indeed, Kennedy's work breaks neglected ground on a thought-provoking topic that is or ought to be of interest to any student of the literary and cultural history of the period. Moreover, *Just Anger* adds to the growing body of fascinating scholarly work on the study of human emotions and their expression.

Kennedy analyses a judicious sampling of early modern texts, including works written by or attributed to Elizabeth Cary (*The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* and *The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II*), as well as Mary Wroth's romance, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* and Protestant martyr Anne Askew's *Examinations*. She also looks at several counterblasts from the *querelle des femmes* tradition, especially Rachel Speght's *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, which answers Joseph Swetnam's heavy-handed *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women*. Kennedy's study – impressively researched, tantalizingly argued and gracefully written – attempts to document what she refers to as the period's »gendering of emotions« (S. 1). According to Kennedy, women in early modern England are believed »to get angry *more* often and *more* easily than men because of their physiological, intellectual, and moral inferiority to men« (S. 3). Kennedy outlines the implications of this assumption:

First, because women's anger is evidence of their weaker nature, every expression of anger reconfirms that view [...] Second, the link between anger and inferiority can be used to disqualify a woman as an authoritative speaker and to either discount or ignore the causes for her anger [...] Third, given that divine, natural and social laws all assume women's subordinate status and their need for male governance, a woman's anger constitutes an act of resistance or rebellion against authority and order from the perspective of her superior. (S. 4)

Kennedy culls examples from male writers of the period (Erasmus, Juan Luis Vives, Edward Reynolds and Thomas Wright) to contend that a decidedly patriarchal society saw women's anger as irrational and groundless, dangerous and hostile or trivial and harmless. More often than not society simply ignored it. Witness, says Kennedy, *The Taming of the Shrew* and Petruchio's cavalier dismissal of Kate's righteous ire as nothing more than »a paltry cap« – a trifling matter. Kennedy maintains that her featured texts aim a much-needed salvo at the status quo.

Collectively, these works refuse a dismissive characterisation of women's anger as »just« or merely anger; instead, with varying degrees of conviction, they defend women's »just« and legitimate anger in response to assertions of women's natural weakness and inferiority. (S. 22)

Kennedy is clearly at her best when providing close textual analysis. Of particular value is her study of Elizabeth Cary's Isabel, queen to Edward II. Kennedy argues persuasively that early modern male authors who write on the same subject consistently downplay, devalue or dismiss Isabel's just anger and, by extension, the just anger of all women. Francis Hubert's poem on Edward II represents Isabel's (and women's) emotions as »always excessive and contrary« (S. 79); Michael Drayton's work (*The Barons' Wars*) allows her a legitimate anger, but one that leads, significantly, neither to »insight or definitive action. Instead, it leaves the Queen conflicted« (S. 86); and Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the second* renders the wronged Isabel all but invisible through concentration on Gaveston's rise to power: the play's »concern is more for *his* placement than for her *dis*placement« (S. 81). Cary's work is unique, Kennedy argues, in that it presents Isabel as a more fully-developed character – »a savvy, adept, political actor who takes steps to make Edward a better husband and sovereign« (S. 93). Cary also represents her anger as thoroughly consistent with reason and virtue, *not* the result of female weakness or inferiority. Isabel's anger therefore appears in a positive light – but only »until it threatens male sovereignty and political order« (S. 96). Once her military forces prevail over those of the hapless king, Cary withdraws from her the right to »limited just anger« (S. 96). Isabel's »tears and blushes, her fury and her final submissiveness perform two functions: they not only invoke conventional interpretations but also critique them« (S. 111). According to Kennedy, Cary's »rhetorical strategy itself conforms to the alternative model her history proposes: a right to anger and legitimate opposition to higher authority (in this instance, patriarchal ideology) that does not signal a rejection of her allegiance« (S. 111).

Surely this is feminist criticism at its most interesting. Readers will appreciate Kennedy's analysis regardless of whether they agree with her conclusions. But as is often the case with similar thought-provoking studies, *Just Anger* raises as many issues as it attempts to resolve.

Kennedy assumes, for example, that emotions in general and anger in particular are wholly determined by environment. She sees them as »historically and cultural variable constellations of values, ideas and behaviours, rather than as universal psychobiological events or essences« (S. 20). According to such a view, the root and cause of all anger is thus external to the individual. Remove the external cause – misogyny and oppressive patriarchy, in this case – and anger will, like Karl Marx's nation state, simply wither away. On the contrary, most early moderns, women as well as men, saw anger not only as the reaction to external stimuli, but also as the consequence of a deeply flawed and – to use their preferred terminology – *fallen* human nature; for them the cause was not wholly in the stars but also in themselves.

This view explains the early modern attitude toward the expression of anger, which in the final analysis may be less »gendered« than Kennedy suggests. Recall her above-stated claim that the link between anger and inferiority was deemed sufficient to disqualify a woman as an authoritative speaker or discount the causes of her anger. But does not the literature of the period routinely undermine the reputation of all persons – *once again, men as well as women* – who give easy vent to anger, regardless of the cause?

When Lear, Othello or Romeo fume and froth over real and imagined wrongs, their privileged male status does nothing whatsoever to save them from a loss of credibility.

Finally, there is a problem that arises from Kennedy's exclusive reliance on female-authored texts as the main focus of her study. Whether or not she intends it, her insightful discussion of Elizabeth Cary's portrayal of Isabel may leave the reader with the impression that *only* women writers are fully capable of understanding how a patriarchal society discounts or dismisses the just anger of women. Any study of Shakespeare's heroines shows that this is not the case. Take, for example, the falsely accused Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Slandered as an adulterer by her jealous husband, King Leontes, the queen has little choice but to endure his wrath and submit to his sentence. Such are the legal hazards of living in a monarchical society – hazards, one feels compelled to add, that would *in no way differ* had the unjustly accused been a man. But more to the main point: Shakespeare here as elsewhere does nothing to devalue or ignore his heroine's just anger; on the contrary, he allows Hermione to grow in dramatic stature as that of Leontes is simultaneously diminished. The play's implied remedy is moral rather than political and pertains to the one who suffers injustice rather than to the one who inflicts it: »I must be patient,« Hermione says, »till the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable.« Her conclusion not only reflects an early modern psyche schooled in the value of enduring afflictions that cannot be avoided; it also manifests precisely an understanding of anger whose cause – and cure – is as much interior as it is external. Hermione demonstrates her moral superiority over Leontes by achieving the very self-dominion he has so recklessly lost. And therein may lie the power that transcends those inequalities resulting from Kennedy's »gendering of emotions«.

John Freeh

