

ESSAY

Elisabeth Bronfen

Panoply of Power

Power of Desire

Power comes in many guises. Sometimes it assumes the shape of the sublime, sometimes the face of destruction. Sometimes it comes as a repressive force, sometimes it brings emancipation. While in dramatic texts, it often leads to the apotheosis of the hero and heroine, it can just as easily let them fall into an abyss. In all cases, however, our attention is drawn to the fact that something has disturbed the ordinary course of events. If the mechanisms of power at issue were operating transparently, we would hardly take notice of them. This doesn't, of course, mean that finding closure for those events which made us aware of an intricate battle for influence and mastery in the first place is tantamount to the end of all power relations. These merely continue their course unseen.

Power emerges as an anomaly most strikingly when calculation and passion come into conflict. Strong emotions produce a force of their own, which either helps to implement a particular power game with utmost rigour or allows it fail magnificently owing to personal interests. Compelling – and thus the concern of dramatic art – are, in turn, primarily those stories, in which a rotten kernel at the heart of the law of power comes to surface. These stories render visible both the human casualties resulting from any ruthless enforcement of authority as well as the breaking point of power itself. Those who, by force, seek dominion over others, are themselves invariably implicated in this drive towards suppression. Empowerment and disempowerment manifest themselves as two sides of the same coin.

One of the most seminal preconditions for the survival of the community, played through in countless mythic stories, is, furthermore, predicated on a conflict between the desires of the individual and the cultural codes which necessarily curtail these. As a result, paternal authority and transgression are not only reciprocal, given that the law requires acts of violation so as to impose its prohibitions with particular urgency. Rather, a will to power inevitably also provokes resistance on the part of those whom it seeks to oppress. For this reason, resistance and protest against symbolic injunctions, have – as though in a countermove – emerged as the precondition of modern subjectivity as well. To insist on pitting personal ambitions and fantasies against public dictates and prescriptions means taking control over one's own destiny. The cultural logic of scapegoating offers a poignant solution for this antagonism. Characters whose extreme behaviour allows them to be targeted as marginal, may – indeed must be – sacrificed in the name of community restitution.

At issue in this interplay between power and protest are, then, two types of repression. On the one hand, individual desires that threaten to fundamentally disturb the interests of a concrete family or community must be extinguished. At the same time, by virtue of sacrificing individuals deemed expendable, what also comes to be negotiated is the systemic suppression of those forces which fundamentally question society and its symbolic order. As a result, great mythic stories also thrive on a radical contradiction inherent to notions of heroic apotheosis: to accept the death sentence, which public law has chosen as its just punishment, may appear as a false

choice, given that there is no escape from this conviction. To consciously choose this death, however, also transforms an external enforcement into the expression of an intimate wish. The force of fate becomes a necessity to which one willingly complies, because in one's heart this is what one desires.

The Power of Art

So as to render tangible the conflict between public law and personal desire, antiquity came up with mythic stories in which humans found themselves subjected to the capricious moods of the gods. Faced with this predicament, Orpheus, the singer and poet, willfully engages in a competition with Pluto, in the hope of regaining his deceased bride. While the power of his music overwhelms the god who rules over the realm of the dead, Pluto does impose one condition on the release of his beautiful inmate. While leading Eurydice back to earth, Orpheus must at no point turn around to gaze at her.

If the prohibition necessarily calls forth a transgressive impulse, it also renders visible an ambivalence of feeling on the part of the mourning lover. Orpheus' disobedience can only in part be explained by the suspicion he suddenly harbours that, out of jealousy, Pluto may be in the process of betraying him. Eurydice's sad recognition that, owing to his overwhelming love, Orpheus is in the process of losing her a second time, also draws attention to the fact that this desire has developed a power of its own. What remains unanswered, after all, is whether Orpheus turns around so as to assure himself that he is again in possession of his bride. Or does he seek, instead, to challenge Pluto once more, only this time so as to prove the power of a love that defies all commands?

Far less self-determined is the role ascribed to Eurydice. If her death triggers Orpheus' bold venture into Hades, she ultimately proves to be the stake in a competition in which all power is denied to her. Forced into subjection to death a second time, she can only offer a response of resignation to the foolishness of her bridegroom. What thus comes to be negotiated over her fading body is both the power of his music as well as the destructive force of his possessive love. Orpheus' fatal gaze, however, also draws into focus the danger accompanying a musician's desire to perform his art on the boundary between life and death. One may even want to speculate that Orpheus, the artist, does not even want to claim a living bride from Hades, but rather return with a song authorized by her irrevocable loss. Eurydice's double death emerges as the precondition for his celebrity as an elegiac singer. The fact that Apollo (at least in an edifying version of the myth) asks the mourner to join him in heaven, promising Orpheus that he will rediscover Eurydice's image in the stars, proves once again – with and against death – the power of an imaginary gaze, predicated on the extinction of the actual woman.

The Daughters' Contradiction

The rebellion of individuals, driven by dangerous personal wishes against official prohibitions is often also staged as the conflict between political claims to power and the intimate concerns of the family. In this double struggle for power, official law proves to be intertwined with private desires in a manner that involves both a battle between the sexes as well as a struggle between generations. Often, as is the case in *La clemenza di Tito*, we find a mixture between blind jealousy and scrupulous ambition at the centre of the conflict, as in the case of Vitellia, the daughter of the deposed ruler of Rome, who seeks to protect her own political power in the city. Because the noble emperor, Tito, in turn, is not willing to reap political gain from his romantic disappointment, a fatal destiny can be turned into good fortune. Pitted against both destructive

betrayal and stern judgment, sweet forgiveness proves to be a third, mediating attitude, overcoming the extremity of the other two articulations of power.

In *Aida*, a different constellation of the interplay between war politics and family strife is played through. In this case the embattled fathers consciously compromise the lives of their daughters – Aida and Amneris – so as to accomplish their own political interests. Both women find themselves torn between the power of their ambivalent love for Radamès and their loyalty toward their fatherland. Aida, in her role as a captured slave, functions as the physical stake in a competition between the two quarrelling kings, given that Amonasro claims the aim of his military campaign is to liberate his daughter. Not only is the question as to who is the more powerful ruler to be decided over her body, but also the question how, in a world of war, personal passion might win the day.

Compelled to prove his unconditional for Aida, Radamès, in turn, must betray the army which he had initially led to victory against the Ethiopian forces. Once the conspiracy is found out, he, too, finds himself faced with a false choice. While, on the one hand, a flight from Egypt would be tantamount to breaking with the code of the warrior he has hitherto lived by, allowing Amneris to save him would, on the other hand, imply betraying his true love. By accepting the death sentence imposed upon him, he can acknowledge the authority of the law even while undermining its power. He is willing to die not for the good of the nation, but for his personal desire. Aida's decision to seek out the vault in which Radamès has been imprisoned, so as to share death with him, serves to commemorate this transpolitical love. Amneris, who alone survives the political battle fought through at the heart of these two royal families, embodies a different kind of false choice. To her is left a song of mourning, attesting the force of fate to which she, too, must now comply; namely the loss of her romantic happiness but also the political responsibility, which she, as the surviving daughter of the pharaoh, must now assume.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear* we find a different enmeshment between public and intimate power. Here a family affair, namely the detachment of the daughters from their father, is negotiated as a question of political sovereignty. The old king wants something impossible when he claims that he wishes to relinquish his power in the public realm even while, in the domestic realm, he seeks to retain the superiority of his demands as a father. This contradiction at the heart of paternal law, which the two older daughters simply refuse to engage with, sets the tragedy in motion. As the logical consequence of Lear's abdication, they divide the realm bequeathed to them amongst themselves, even as they dispose of him as a father as well. The old king had, of course, hoped to wield emotional power over his daughters despite having granted them all his political influence. Contrary to this expectation, once he has been cast out into the brutality of bare nature, he instead serves as an embodiment of their own political severity. The extreme brutality with which these two sisters seek to achieve their own aims offers a grotesque reflection of cultural anxieties regarding political power placed in the hands of daughters who have repudiated the feminine virtue of clemency.

The silence of the third daughter may appeal more to our sympathy, but it, too, is evidence of affective rejection. Cordelia responds to her father's dishonest confusion between private and public claims with an equally unrelenting refusal. She has nothing to say. If, as a result, she finds herself excluded from her father's inheritance, she turns familial ostracism into a political challenge. The radicalness with which in *King Lear* a family feud finds itself played out as a bloody battle between nations bears witness to what is rotten in paternal law. The war, called forth by a father's blind claim to dominion over his daughters, results in the destruction of his entire family.

Power of the Impotent

The case is a very different one for those disempowered figures who are confined to such abominable living conditions that they can only fall back on dangerous erotic games so as to give voice to their discontent. So as to protect herself against the jealous frenzy of the soldier Wozzeck, with whom she has an illegitimate child, Marie declares she would rather have a knife in her stomach than his fists in her face. After a thoughtless flirtation with a drum major, her wish will come true. Under the light of a blood-red moon, at the edge of the pond in the neighbouring forest, Wozzeck will stab her to death. The equally thoughtless affect of this destitute soldier, however, merely mirrors the deplorable social powers that had long ago turned him into human detritus.

Hauptmann's maid, Rose Bernd, in turn, has recourse to killing her child, because, in the courtroom, she can find no words to describe the sexual entanglements which she has unwittingly got herself caught up in. Even if the murders committed by Katerina Izmailova, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, appear to be far more calculated, they too, serve to mirror the social conditions that hold this wife of a provincial businessman hostage. Her erotic charms emerge as the means that will allow her to turn the brutal oppression she experiences in her home against the very men (most notable her husband and her father-in-law) who had repeatedly mistreated her.

From the start, the desire of these figures is condemned to fail because, rather than acting as autonomous, self-determined subjects, they can only respond to the desperate condition in which they find themselves. For a brief moment, the destruction they call forth draws our attention to the cruel consequences of being left behind by society. Then everything falls back into the routine of the everyday. The children run to the pond to look at Marie's corpse; the prisoners trek on towards their prison camp in Siberia without Katerina.

In this panoply of erotic seductions, Lulu, the infamous femme fatale of modernity, assumes a special place. By arousing a dangerous fascination in the very men who seek to appropriate her, she hopes to subjugate them to her own desires. And yet, even if she arouses jealousy, betrayal, blackmail and violence in others, her destructive power emerges as purely reactive. Rather than pursuing a sophisticated strategy, Lulu's charm merely sets a fatal series of portentous events in motion.

While she is herself the victim of social conditions she can not control (dependent in her very existence on the good graces of prosperous men), the skilful role-playing with which she enchants others, mirrors the fragility of her own situation as well. The portrait which accompanies Lulu wherever she goes, tellingly depicts the seductress in a Pierrot costume. Her charm is to be understood as a masquerade, behind which no self-determined actress is hiding. As such, Lulu quite explicitly offers herself up to her various lovers as a screen woman, confident that they want to be betrayed by the image she embodies. If, then, Lulu is never actually understood by those who so vehemently desire her, she also exceeds all fantasies that come to be projected onto her. In her con game, she is driven by a fateful force which allows her to repeatedly turn fatal accidents in her favour. Given that her erotic power is less concerned with survival than with self-expenditure, we find in her story a modern variation of false choice, discovering in death the only freedom that can be elected.

Because Lulu does not make claim to any existence beyond the roles that others project onto her, she also renders visible the automatization of modern subjectivity. She allows herself to float in the circle of possibilities that life in the big city, with all its excesses and pitfalls, offers. Having

emerged out of nowhere, she ultimately falls back into the abyss of the unseen destitute urban masses, having once more been relegated to the margins of society. Decisive is the necessity of this circular movement. The disasters which Lulu instigates and the abuses she is compelled to bear emerge as two sides of the same coin.

In Jack the Ripper, who holds a strange fascination for her, she finally meets her nemesis. Almost mechanically driven to destroy the feminine, with no psychological traits that characterize him over and beyond the menace he represents to women, he, too, functions as a void in the social fabric. His killing of Lulu is both accidental and fateful. And the corpses he leaves behind in her windowless garret in London, represent the logical conclusion to the series of unlucky events which Lulu is responsible for. His anonymity draws into focus once again a dramaturgic logic which entangles the power of desire with the power of the law. If the serial killer renders visible the fallibility of the very financial and justice system that came to destroy Lulu and her admirers, he again disappears from sight once his deed has been accomplished. The law will not catch up with him and can, therefore, neither judge nor condemn him. The corpses, in turn, that are left behind on the stage, render up an evidence of their own: as the *primum mobile* of society, the circulation of power continues to have its effect, albeit unnoticed. Power inexorably remains not despite but because of the victims it claims. We can depend on its renewed recurrence – on stage and off.