

## Talking to the Stove: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

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Beth Henley's play *Crimes of the Heart* offers the audience a chance to stand around the kitchen with three sisters — Lenny, Meg, and Babe — as though at a party in home of good friends. It is a play that flaunts family and home and honesty, but its success lies in seeming to be what it is not — a tale with a happy ending.

One might debate the degree of hope present at the end. The final moment creates a “magical, golden, sparkling” snapshot of “The sisters . . . laughing and catching” pieces of Lenny's birthday cake (*Crimes* 125).<sup>1</sup> Meg has already said, “I could want someone” (98), rather than resorting to the old tactic of fabricating a story that will please Old Granddaddy. Barnette Lloyd seems to have struck a deal with Zackery to take the heat off Babe. And Lenny has finally stood her ground against her cousin Chick, as well as phoning Charlie Hill in Memphis. But Henley has countered these gestures of autonomy with too many acknowledgments of the sisters' immaturity for the ending to be triumphant.

Among them are details and actions that may be understood more clearly within the context of fairy tales — Babe's brushing her hair, Meg's broken shoe, Lenny's dead horse, all three sisters' fondness for eating sweets, to name several. But the most pervasive is the set — the kitchen. It recalls the site of Cinderella's drudgery, but it also evokes the qualities of nurturing and security associated with the hearth and stove, and ultimately the mother.

As Bruno Bettelheim has articulated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, many of the best-known fairy tales — “Hansel and

Gretel," "Little Red Riding-Hood," "Rapunzel," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," and "Cinderella" among them — demonstrate the successful negotiating of the perils of childhood and adolescence. A heroine like Snow White, for instance, must outgrow narcissism, mentally and physically, before becoming an autonomous individual. Bettelheim stresses that the failure to develop completely precludes the forming of successful relationships in adulthood.

An examination of *Crimes of the Heart* — especially the images and actions that define its central characters — reveals that Henley speaks the same language as the tellers of the tales that have offered reassuring examples of personal development for centuries in cultures around the world. But Henley shows us three infantile women for whom psychological autonomy and thus satisfactory relations remain unlikely; moreover, she tempts us to remain in the kitchen with the three MaGrath sisters, intoxicated and diverted by rediscovered affection and apparent freedom.

Henley's persistent symbol of the sisters' immaturity — the eating of sweets — reveals the most durable relationship influencing the MaGrath women. On the day of their mother's funeral, Old Granddaddy tried to console them by treating them to "banana splits for breakfast" (72). Meg recalls that "he thought that would make it all better," thus distracting the sisters from their grief. "I think I ate about five!" Babe gloats. "He kept shoving them down us!" (73). Such gorging brings to mind Hansel and Gretel's compulsive devouring of the gingerbread house, an act representative of immaturity.

From the opening curtain, when Lenny is trying to mount a solitary candle in her birthday cookie, until the last, when all three women exult in the cake, sweets proliferate. Chick presents Lenny with a box of assorted cremes. Cokes are drunk, candies nibbled. Meg remembers Willie Jay as "that little kid we used to pay a nickel to, to . . . bring us back a cherry coke" (46). Barnette fondly savors the time he saw Babe: "At the Christmas bazaar, year before last. You were selling cakes and cookies and . . . candy" (59). Of course, the most excessive indulgence of sugar *per se* is Babe's stirring it into lemonade by the spoonfuls. "I like a lot of sugar in mine," she explains (33).

Although Old Granddaddy never appears in the play and is comatose by the end, his influence is undeniable. Meg chides Lenny for "living your life as Old Granddaddy's nursemaid" (79) and accuses him of discouraging, if not preventing, any romantic activities on Lenny's part. While Lenny's loyalty to Old Granddaddy might be written off as the eldest female child's traditional duty, he has perpetrated the same dominion over the other sisters. Babe, whose nickname — "Dancing Sugar Plum" — continues the eating motif, provided what Meg calls Old Granddaddy's "finest hour" (21) by marrying Zackery Botrelle. Lenny agrees enthusiastically: "He remarked how Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it or not" (22). Apparently the most footloose of the sisters, Meg, too, pays allegiance to Old Granddaddy — by fabricating glamorous lies about her recording career, her movie career, even an appearance on Johnny Carson.

While Old Granddaddy may have encouraged self-gratification in order to curtail the sisters' grieving (and, by extension, their personal development), subsequent events point out the harm done. Babe has tried to relinquish control of herself to the extent that she appears unable to distinguish between the trivial (making lemonade) and the lethal (shooting Zackery). Meg's whimsy has led to her abandonment of Doc Porter in Biloxi and his crippling by Hurricane Camille. Also, after the night with Doc during the play, she returns with the heel broken off one of her shoes, a detail that reminds one of the important role the slipper, a traditional female symbol, plays in some variants of the Cinderella story. But whereas the slipper's fitting signifies Cinderella's achievement of selfhood, the broken heel of Meg's shoe suggests her incomplete condition. But the sharpest complaint of the harm Old Granddaddy has done to Meg comes from Lenny, who scolds, thinking of the extra jingle bells Meg wore sewn in her petticoats after being the one to find her mother hanged, "You have no respect for other people's property! You just take whatever you want! You just take it!" (78).

*Crimes of the Heart* evokes another recurrent fairy tale symbol — brushing one's hair, an act associated with sexuality

in "Rapunzel," "Snow White," "The Goosegirl," and other stories. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Babe, "always the prettiest and most perfect" (21) McGrath sister, according to Lenny, spends much of Act Two brushing her hair and, as Act Three opens, appears with the same "pink hair curlers" she brought from jail and "begins brushing her hair" (63). If Meg has been the most flamboyant in exhibiting the incompleteness of her personality by means of self-gratification, Babe passively counts on her beauty to escape responsibility. As her collecting articles about her shooting Zackery "to keep an accurate record" (70) implies, Babe pretends to be an observer of her own life. Her disinterest takes the form of falling asleep while Zackery talks at the dinner table, and she appears to misunderstand the ramifications of having been discovered with a black lover ("Why do you think I'm so worried about his getting public exposure? I don't want to ruin his reputation!" [48]). Babe's greatest exertion is to escape life through suicide; and if she does make a discovery, as when she decides her mother had "hung that cat along with her" "'cause she was afraid of dying all alone" (118), Babe's imagination is capable of nothing more than self-projection. On occasion, she exhibits understanding of her predicament, but she is more likely to resort to mindless truisms as she tries to comfort herself or her sisters. When Lenny complains that she "can't seem to do too much" (96), Babe is ready with this illogical encouragement: "You just have to put your mind to it, that's all. It's like how I went out and bought that saxophone, just hoping I'd be able to attend music school and start up my own career. I just went out and did it. Just on hope. Of course, now it looks like . . . Well, it just doesn't look like things are gonna work out for me. But I know they would for you" (97).

It should be noted that Chick makes a point of brushing her hair in Act One, soon after changing her stockings, an act Henley's stage directions say should seem "slightly grotesque" (4). No doubt, Chick would like to seem fetching, but the inappropriateness of her grooming in someone else's kitchen is emphasized by her concern that her hair might be "pooching out in the back" (7) and by her grotesque dropping of a ball of hair onto the floor. But when Babe brushes her hair, she is alone

and taking pleasure in the mutual attraction between Barnette Lloyd and herself.

It is Lenny MaGrath whose actions seem most promising of independence, even though at thirty she seems to have been the sister most contained by domesticity. Lenny's association with the kitchen might suggest that she would carry out a nurturing role, or that she were being nurtured for eventual autonomy. But neither possibility obtains. Her misformed ovary precludes childbearing; and even though she has served Old Granddaddy faithfully, Lenny cannot sustain Babe in the crisis that follows the shooting of Zackery. Indeed, Lenny frantically wires Meg; and when the sisters have gathered, neither Lenny nor the others do much nurturing.

The cot that Lenny has moved into the kitchen while looking after Old Granddaddy indicates she is no mother figure, but like Cinderella sleeping among the hearth ashes, a not-yet intact individual, in need of nurturing. And her behavior has the self-effacing quality of her fairy tale forebear: Lenny is admirable for her loyalty, her meekness; she is certainly more likable than her self-centered, self-righteous (though often *right*) cousin Chick. Out of this womb of character-building, we might expect Lenny to emerge mature. Indeed, as the play ends, she finally expresses her resentment at Chick, chasing her out of the kitchen "right up the mimosa tree" (114), and she has mustered the courage to phone Charlie Hill. It is possible, to continue this line of thought, to regard the final feast of the play — the gorging on birthday cake — as further nurturing of Lenny.

But there is too much evidence otherwise. First and foremost, it is too late for Lenny. She is not an adolescent in the process of forming herself for adulthood; instead, she is thirty years old, with a long record of uncertainty. Second, there is no one to nurture her — no dwarfs or other surrogate parents. Third, the nourishment her sisters provide is reminiscent of the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel" — a symbol of self-gratification.

In her confusion, Lenny puts on service to Old Granddaddy like one more disguise, a role assumed by default because it was available. For the snapshots she sent to Lonely Hearts of



the South, Lenny wore a wig; when she works outdoors, she dons Old Grandmama's hat and gloves. These "faces" suggest, as does her undeveloped ovary, that Lenny has not developed to the extent of being independent and productive. Moreover, the news that her horse Billy Boy has been killed symbolically rules out any journeying toward maturity, as is often the case in fairy tales like "The Goosegirl," in which the talking horse Falada is an important figure.

If there is anywhere Lenny is getting, it is, as she herself admits, older. Knowledge of her birthday permeates the play's three acts; and though the occasion prompts celebrations, it reminds Lenny of her mortality and loneliness. Doc Porter's news about Billy Boy makes her weep for her age. On several occasions, she apologizes about her age to her sisters, and with good reason. As soon as Meg enters in Act One, she exclaims, looking at Lenny's face, "My God, we're getting so old!" (15). Even when the sisters are happily gathered together and eager to play a game of Hearts, Lenny remembers the rules: "Hearts are bad, but the Black Sister is the worst of all" (74).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, independence remains elusive (and illusive) for Lenny, just as it has for Meg and Babe. Unlike mature fairy tale heroines, who get married (and thus embody the harmonious integration of the various elements of their personalities, according to Bettelheim), the MaGrath sisters' dealings with men have been disastrous. Far from being whole women, Lenny, Meg, and Babe represent, respectively, drudgery, self-indulgence, and passivity — three facets of stunted selfhood, all in a suspension of subservience to Old Granddaddy. He has been both protector and oppressor; they have been molded by him and remain unable to resist him effectively. Now the old man lies in a coma — an absent, senseless patriarch, an impersonal god; and the play offers us a final image of the sisters hilarious together, a bitter greeting-card tableau commemorating their delusions and their regressive regrouping.

In addition to activating the ambiguous condition of the MaGraths, Henley's setting *Crimes of the Heart* in the kitchen recalls a favorite means of a fairy tale character's telling a secret without breaking a vow of secrecy — speaking to a stove or fireplace so that the intended auditor might overhear. In this

case, there is no beneficent character (usually an older male in the tales) to effect the teller's salvation; instead, the audience eavesdrops on the sisters' intimacies. Ironically, we are the only auditors of the *whole* story and so develop an understanding that surpasses any individual character's.

*Crimes of the Heart*, in other words, invites an audience — we moderns uprooted from families and dislocated from the small town or ethnic neighborhood — to return home. Not only does the play star nostalgic women, but also its format can effect nostalgia. As we laugh with (and at) the women — and certainly at the clichés — that humor, becoming progressively wilder, may be our permission once more to revel in what we believe, as autonomous individuals, we left behind. ♣

### Notes

1. Since all subsequent citations in this article come from the play, only page numbers will be included parenthetically.
2. Predictably, Meg becomes excited by this symbol of death, while Babe wonders, "And spades are the black cards that aren't the puppy dog feet?" (74).

### Works Consulted

- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1977.  
Henley, Beth. *Crimes of the Heart*. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1986.