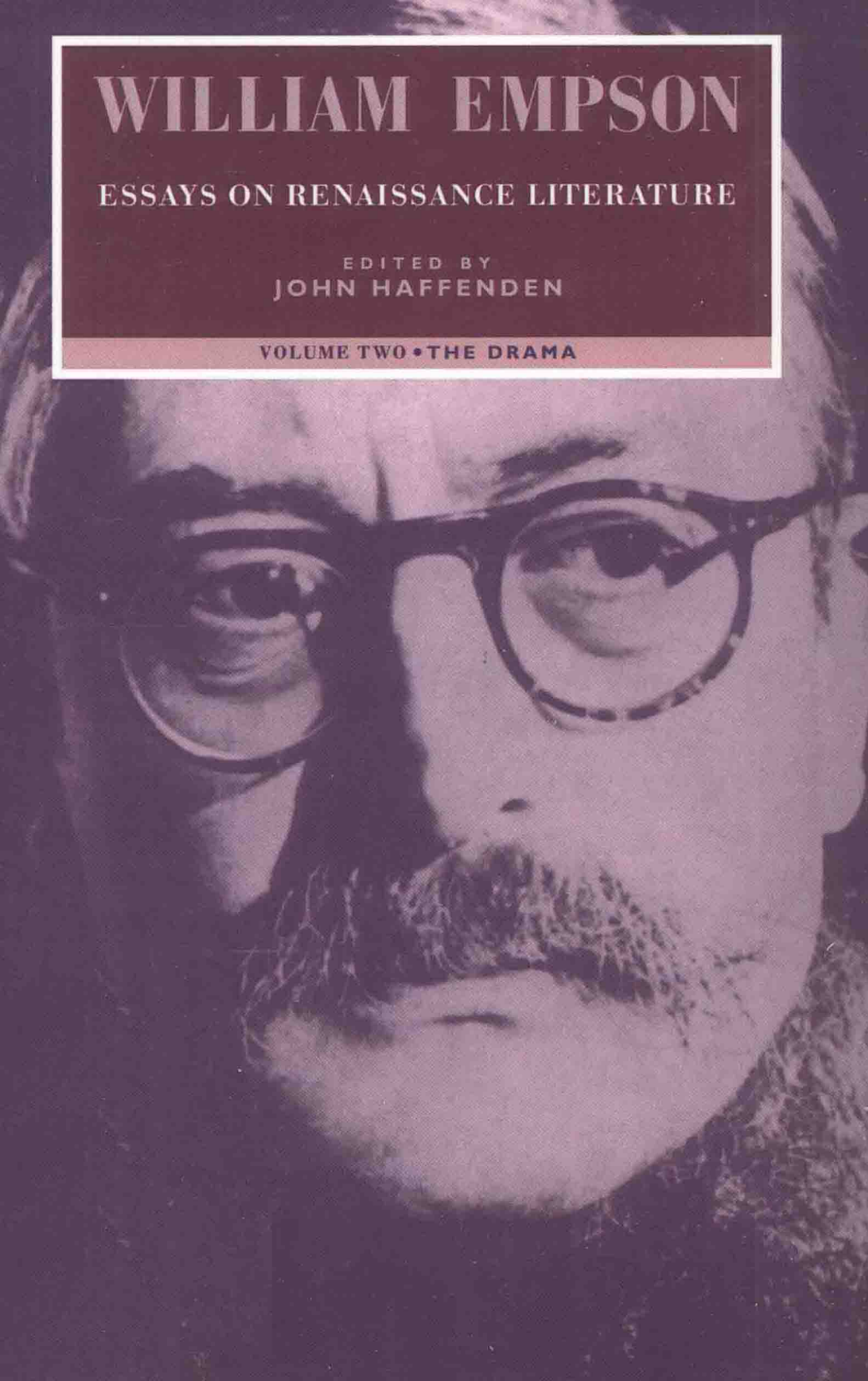


WILLIAM EMPSON

ESSAYS ON RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

EDITED BY
JOHN HAFFENDEN

VOLUME TWO • THE DRAMA



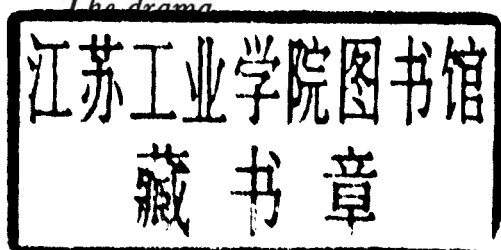
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University of Sheffield

Volume two

The drama



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The remaining pieces – ‘*The Spanish Tragedy*: a letter’ (1958), *The Spanish Tragedy* (II) (c. 1976), ‘*Volpone* Again’ (c. 1975), *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1956–60), and ‘The Spirits of the *Dream*’ (c. 1976–84) – are published here for the first time; all are taken from Empson’s typescript drafts. The nature of these essays, and the circumstances of their writing, are described in the Introduction. The title ‘*Volpone* Again’ is Empson’s; the other titles are editorial.

Editorial principles are outlined in the section on ‘Sources and acknowledgements’ in Volume One: *Donne and the new philosophy*. As in the first volume, and for reasons which are likewise explained therein, I have chosen to provide rather a full apparatus of notes; the occasional note by Empson himself is followed by the initials ‘WE’ in parentheses.

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Introduction

'The plan of one Shakespeare book and then one Jonson etc. book seems to be an admirable one, settling a whole area', William Empson wrote to Cambridge University Press on 5 November 1981. 'But of course I must arrange them as real books . . .'¹ He had been proposing to compile various collections of his essays since as early as 1958; but in the event, after publishing *Milton's God* (1961), he went on to compose an extraordinary number of further essays in several major areas – specifically those that have now been gathered in *Using Biography* (which he had just finished at the time of his death in April 1984), *Essays on Shakespeare*, edited by David B. Pirie (Cambridge University Press, 1987), and a heartening essay entitled *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-book and Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'*, edited by John Henry Jones (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Furthermore, the grand assemblage of items in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987) shows that Empson remained tirelessly productive in the later years: his habits of work and his output were as continuous as they were wide-ranging.

The present collection of essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is the second part of a two-volume edition of Empson's work on Renaissance literature; this twofold package is designed to complement the canonical volume *Essays on Shakespeare*. In letters to friends, Empson announced this volume – which he called by the working title *Some Elizabethan Plays and their Stage* (he never quite mastered the knack of devising snappy titles) – well over a decade ago. 'The next one is about other Elizabethan playwrights', he told Christopher Ricks in November 1981; and then, in September 1982, 'The book on Shakespeare and one on other Elizabethan playwrights are to be done by CUP.'² Earlier still, he wrote to Ian Parsons in 1975: 'I have been delayed by various things but am

going on quite well now, and if I keep it up will finish "Elizabethan Plays" within a year at least. One keeps finding soft bits that need more information to carry the needed weight, but most of it is just re-writing now.³ The only problem, as he had notified Parsons as early as 1958, was that 'I have always worked slowly and would still do so if I didn't have to mess about being a Professor, but I hope you don't regard me as already dead.' His extended apologia – which stands as fair warning to any literary critic, whether hack or professor – figures in a letter from the following year:

literary criticism . . . has become a much more powerful and interesting tool since about 1900, and many of the able literary young want to go in for it. They can I think certainly do it quite as well while employed as dons, though they must be warned against insisting they must be Professors, a capacity in which they are liable to get heavy extra chores. Bonamy Dobrée warned me like that when I was looking for a job after leaving Communist China . . . I do not regret the way it fell. But at least a literary critic can become a university lecturer without feeling that he is wasting his talent, and indeed is likely to improve it that way . . . I do not know how a literary critic could be in such close contact with the existing audience reaction anywhere else; he certainly won't do it by writing journalism in obedience to the hunch of an editor . . . You must remember that, if a young critic makes the great renunciation, saying 'It is beneath me to read all these horrid essays', the next thing he will have to do is turn out a lot of shockingly coarse hackwork, which really is beneath him and will remain permanently in print to shame his later years. A university job does at least mean that you are free to print in a decently considered manner . . .⁴

The contents of this volume range from the first item on *The Spanish Tragedy*, first published in 1956, through the bracing pieces on *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* dating from the late 1960s, to an essay on the subject of 'Elizabethan Spirits' incited by the work of Dame Frances Yates (1980). In happy addition, there are a number of previously unpublished pieces that Empson was working on during his later years, including critical analyses of works by Kyd, Jonson, and Webster (which eagerly revisit early controversies), and a capacious, imaginative study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which – though it survives only in ramifying and unfinished form – ventures a major new thesis on the play and its context. In fact, over half of this volume consists of essays that are published here for the first time.

Empson remarked in 1981, apparently to his own surprise: 'While in employment, I raised hares, usually reported in magazine

articles, and left them to be worked out during my retirement. But I now find that a lot of unprinted and incomplete material has piled up.⁵ The material had piled up in part because he could never rest content with his own essays, but even more so because he knew that no essay could ever say the last word: every text and topic, every issue, had to be reviewed and reinvigorated. 'Besides, I am always finding mistakes in my old articles while having to read some book again for a lecture', he readily allowed;⁶ likewise in the opening remarks to his Clark Lectures, delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1974: 'I am usually saying things that other people disagree with, and I need to present a much stronger case in print than I do in a lecture.'⁷ Not just leftovers, but a cogent combination of argued and reargued essays: such is the sum total of Empson's long-considered, long-awaited 'Jonson etc.' volume. (In his negotiations with Cambridge University Press, Empson was always insistent that the collected editions of his essays should be so much more than 'all old-hat' pieces reprinted out of periodicals.)

As a rationalist, Empson is keen to prove the supremacy of meaning over mystery; sense and story stand head and shoulders above symbol. Thus it is not surprising to find that a fair part of his criticism is taken up with what we nowadays term the 'hidden agenda', the subtext – along with the genuine likelihood, in the context of Renaissance theatrical production, of religious or political censorship. With regard to *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, Empson believed that the modern reader is quite entitled to feel wary of a play-text which is framed by the story of a revenger, Andrea, who lacks a demonstrable, let alone any satisfactory, motive for revenge – since he was killed in a formal battle with the enemy. Arthur Freeman, in *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (1967), rightly insists too: 'we may assume that if Kyd knew what he was doing, the death of Castile finally is not, as some have suggested, either an accident or a gross dramatic error in the interest of pure sensationalism'.⁸ Yet many critics of Kyd do seem to be complacent about these problems. A recent editor of the play has written, for example: 'Such criticism is misguided because Kyd's interest lies in the consequences, proportionate or not, of human enmity. When the play concludes in the satisfaction of Andrea and Revenge, we may feel that morally there is a good deal to deplore . . . But we feel equally the bitter consistency of motive and action that has led to this point.

Kyd has dramatised, through the revenge idiom, that is to say, a rigorously coherent and emotionally convincing set of human circumstances that in the last analysis are tragic, not moralistic, in character.⁹ From Empson's point of view, such rhetoric has to be seen as a fudging, for it is the very lack of 'consistency of motive', of dramatic point, that is so vexatious, so suspicious. Empson put forward his own considered solution to this inconsistency or riddle (or this hush-up, as he preferred to think it) in a letter which appears to date from the 1970s:

I had been trying to make sense of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Dr Faustus*, two foundation masterpieces which are shockingly silly in the mere story, a thing only hidden from Teacher (though not from a plain-minded pupil) because of the monstrous Aestheticism which has become an Eng. Lit. Trades Union regulation. I agree now that this is impossible from the surviving texts [although he did try to argue so in his initial essay on *The Spanish Tragedy* below]; both plays ran into a lot of trouble with the censorship, and were considerably mangled, as well as being continually altered because they were in great demand. In both cases the audience *knew* that the point of the story had been cut out; this made them all the more gleeful at having the essentials of it acted; though of course other persons in the audience felt that this version had been purged. The presumption that everybody in the audience must have been stupid (or must have been a pure aesthete, at least) has blocked all grasp of the dramatic situation.¹⁰

The crux that has been cut out of the plot, Empson argues, is that 'Andrea has suffered the fate of Uriah; the father and brother of Bel-imperia, that is, the Duke of Castile and Lorenzo, had arranged to have him killed in battle so that they could marry her to Balthazar the Prince of Portugal.' Of course it might be held against Empson that he is vainly postulating a suppression of significance, whereas the received text, albeit corrupt and irregular in parts, betrays no positive sign of such a silencing. (He even goes so far as to make up a brief bit of dialogue for a 'lost' closet scene, in order to rediscover the clandestine original 'message' that he alone posits; and this kind of intervention, this creative interpolation, may strike many readers as an utterly illegitimate critical trick. Yet, as Empson would say, 'The reconstruction only gives enough words for a production making the plot intelligible.')

¹¹ Empson's answer was that such a gaping absence in the play, such a telling want of dramatic point in the part of the plot that should bother Andrea the Ghost, only goes to show how successfully the censor did his job. Hence, according to Empson, the true covert story of *The Spanish*

Tragedy entered a political critique of dynastic marriages. Queen Elizabeth I, following her announcement in 1581 that she was minded to marry the Duc d'Alençon, 'was eager to prevent discussion of her private affairs, and the censor would be afraid to pass anything about murders committed to help forward royal marriages'. Empson goes on, astutely here: 'I think he cut a whole scene after III. xi, which had been followed by the now missing act-break; like the other act-breaks, it gave a reaction from the ghost, who learns here what he was sent back from Hades to learn.'¹²

Most modern critics of the play agree with Philip Edwards' argument that the copy for the first extant edition of the play, published for Edward White in 1592, contains material of two distinct kinds; and that the latter section of the play at least, following Act III, scene xiv, manifests certain elements of revision and abridgement.¹³ Two further factors need to be re-emphasised by way of prefacing any estimate of the true nature of the play, and any sustainable interpretation of it: not only was White's edition a piracy of a (now lost) *editio princeps* owned by one Abel Jeffes, but it also carries the exceptionally anomalous announcement 'Newly corrected and amended of such gross faults as passed in the first impression' (as does Jeffes' edition of 1594). John Henry Jones argues: 'The "gross faults" may have been matter for ecclesiastical censorship, which would explain Whitgift's involvement, and the announcements of amendment would then have become mandatory inscriptions.'¹⁴ Given such a persuasive crucial suggestion, maybe it is really not so outlandish after all for Empson to have tried to recover, by way of his admittedly unorthodox device of creative reconstitution, a pristine plot behind the signally corrupt text that has come down to us: to do anything less is to bow to the conditions of Elizabethan dramatic censorship. (In any case, even recent scholars who have specifically enquired into the occasions of Renaissance censorship seem to draw divergent conclusions.)¹⁵

Empson stated it as 'a general truth about the pleasant and economical habit of reprinting old articles that the author had better say each time how far his opinion had changed now'.¹⁶ Moreover, the critics of the critic should always be answered, as a point of honour: 'In the learned world, a man loses his standing if he refuses to answer a plain refutation . . .'¹⁷ He himself was stubborn in his opinions and pugnacious in answering back; he loved a public tumble with his rival critics, and scorned 'literary prattle' and

jargon. In truth, he could be downright rude to both friend and foe – for reasons set out at the beginning of his career, in a piece written at the same time as *Seven Types of Ambiguity*:

if you attack a view in any detail that proves you to have some sympathy with it; there is already a conflict in you which mirrors the conflict in which you take part; that is why you understand it sufficiently to take part in it. Only because you can foresee and enter into the opposing arguments can you answer them; only because it is interesting to you do you engage in argument about it.

For personally I am attracted by the notion of a hearty indifference to one's own and other people's feelings, when a fragment of the truth is in question ...¹⁸

For that reason he chose, quite often, to adopt an adversarial stance in his criticism: it helped him to have a prick to kick against. However, it needs to be said that very little of Empson's argumentation is *ad hominem*, even when he is attacking a fellow critic for being crazy or 'neo-Christian' (or both): invariably, in Empson's habits of critical address, the person is turned into a peg, the proper name into a notion. Furthermore, there is frequently a helping of exuberance to leaven his critical enmities – and even his odd errors and misrepresentations.

His essays on Jonson exhibit that tendency. John Creaser, in '*Volpone: The Mortifying of The Fox*' (1975), for example, adjudged that Empson's first article on *Volpone* ventured 'an extraordinarily uneven argument';¹⁹ Martin Butler rebukes the same piece as 'provocative and untrustworthy', and likewise rates Empson for being 'characteristically provoking' on the subject of *The Alchemist*.²⁰ Exactly what irks the experts may be seen in an Empson letter of about 1973 to a (not unfriendly) critic that is itself a counterblast against virtually all the other critics, the mass of misreaders.

This misreading is always of a pietistic character, but otherwise just whatever will serve. Take *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*; you say that I am obviously wrong because I do no close reading. In reprinting I had better add some detailed evidence that Ben Jonson was not a Puritan, but hated them for trying to interfere with his pleasures; I need not add any 'analysis', to show that he habitually writes in a sardonic manner, hinting that what the character on the stage admires and praises does not really deserve such praise. This work has been thoroughly done already; the question is how to interpret his intention. The story that he despised bodily pleasure, and despised all his characters for wanting to enjoy it, whereas they ought to be yearning to be pure in Heaven like Ben Jonson, strikes me as such gross

farcical hypocrisy that it does not need verbal disproof. What proves my case, I think, is that the plays are so very much better when this dirty nonsense is wiped or scraped away.²¹

Accordingly, in the essay I have entitled 'Volpone again', John Creaser is pressed into service as Empson's whipping-boy – not necessarily because he is the worst offender, but because Empson has just happened upon his article in *Essays in Criticism* and so fixes upon it for exemplary correction. In defending what he calls Jonson's jovial indulgence of 'rogue-sentiment' in the plays, Empson's seriously sustained general principle is that a good morality should celebrate pleasure sooner than lay down laws of censure. To say the least, in the face of critics who rebuke Empson for seeking (or seeming) to pull the carpet from under Jonson's supposed moral rigour, one might well prefer the opinion of Samuel Schoenbaum (Distinguished Professor of Renaissance Literature and Director, Centre for Renaissance and Baroque Studies, University of Maryland) that Empson's 'vigorously argued essays, while protesting against "the pietistic strain in Eng. Lit.", give Jonson his due as a comic dramatist'.²²

If Empson occasionally erred on the side of burlesquing the opinions of his critical opponents, he had no need at all to fashion men of straw when he came to *The Duchess of Malfi*. There is a long tradition of critics who find fault with the Duchess merely for marrying a second husband (perhaps in order to gratify her carnal desire), or else for electing to get married in hugger-mugger manner – and against the express wishes of her jealously aristocratic brothers – to her major-domo, who is no better than a household servant: a decent, weak chap or low-born opportunist, depending on how you take him. The Duchess commits a wanton error, the argument runs, and maybe deserves her tragic fate. ('Neo-Christians' have a 'craving to scold and befoul', as Empson bemoaned.) Denigrators of the Duchess include Clifford Leech – whose monograph on the play (*Webster: 'The Duchess of Malfi'*, 1963) Empson waylays in 'Mine Eyes Dazzle' – James L. Calderwood, and Joyce E. Peterson. Empson's review of Leech, his initial outcry in defence of the Duchess, is a brief piece, and as such has received little scholarly-critical notice – perhaps because it offers righteous protestation rather more than sustained evidence or full proof. The scholar Lee Bliss remarked in a note, a decade ago, 'William Empson's bluff approach wittily dismisses detractors of the Duchess'²³ – which

seems to leave the reader to guess whether he is praising or patronising. Yet Frank Whigham, in a long and warmly argued recent article ('Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *PMLA*, March 1985), insists upon the force of Empson's position:

Despite documentary arguments against widows remarrying and for the obligations of state service, it seems unlikely that the audience is supposed to find the duchess's action antisocial, hubristic, and licentious, as a certain sector of well-known criticism claims ... Certainly the duchess's plight is pathetic in personal terms, but I object to seeing her as deservedly punished (nonetheless, as it were), chiefly because the ideology that grounds such a judgment – Ferdinand's ideology – is the very ideology the play puts most deeply in question ... Empson's irascible retort to Leech is essential reading on this point.²⁴

It is thus a pleasure to find among Empson's papers a longer composition on the subject of *The Duchess of Malfi*, albeit unfinished, which is printed here for the first time. Empson seems to have begun drafting this larger essay within a short while of the review that takes its title from the most famous line in the play, 'Mine eyes dazzle'; and it may therefore reflect Empson's own judgment that he really did need to present a fuller case for the defence. However, he also evidently sat down to it for a little at a time, over a period of four years or so, since here and there it is a touch circular and reiterative. It is probably best to see it as being comprised of draft sections, written in spurts, towards a substantial essay which the author never found the time to shape into a final form. But it is possible that some of these sections are the original mass from which he mined his initial review of Leech. Despite its unpolished state, this further essay on *The Duchess of Malfi* considerably extends Empson's work on the play in terms both of sprightly analysis and of his engagement with the errant modern scholars he felt compelled to chastise. As always with Empson's criticism, the incidental insights are so marvellous that it is virtually out of the question for an editor to cut or dovetail his sentences, even though this piece had not yet attained a shape that he himself found satisfactory.

In the essays on Jonson and Webster, as in all of his criticism, Empson resolves to locate in literature the best of all possible feelings. Refusing to kowtow to what he once called the 'unpleasing personal habits' of the Christian God, he labours to bring forth a humane large-mindedness and, still better, world-mindedness. Dogma he finds disgusting. As he held, 'It strikes me that modern

critics, whether as a result of the neo-Christian movement or not, have become oddly resistant to admitting that there is more than one code of morals in the world, whereas the central purpose of reading imaginative literature is to accustom yourself to this basic fact.'

Accordingly, Empson tends to see the Renaissance theatre as a locus of dissent, as a forum for undercutting the official line, political or religious, if not for outright subversion. Art is at odds with orthodoxy. It is small wonder then that he worked so often to explain covert literary meanings (including double-plots in drama). The final essays in this volume flow from his absorption in the weird and wonderful drama of the philosophical writings that the European Renaissance termed 'occult' – including the lore concerning the marginal place and purposes of 'daemons' (neither angels nor devils), which Empson liked to call the 'Middle Spirits'. Inspired in part by Frances Yates' *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), Empson steeped himself in the dissertations of Renaissance Hermetism, beginning with the seminal *Hermetica* (reputedly written by the so-called Hermes Trismegistus) and continuing into the lucubrations of Cornelius Agrippa (notably *De Occulta Philosophia*), and Paracelsus (*De Nymphis*). Modern works that helped to excite, or rather irritate, his interest include studies such as *The Invisible World* (1939), by Robert Hunter West, and *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance* (1972), by Wayne Shumaker.

The fullest achievement of Empson's inquiry into the state of the art of English Renaissance magic is the work now published as *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-book and Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'* (1987), which was originally planned as an appendix to a projected edition of *The German and English Faust-books: Parallel Texts*, translated and edited by John Henry Jones – a project that is published, albeit in a sadly less ambitious form, as *The English Faust Book* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). Sickened by the muddle of the surviving texts of *Dr Faustus* – especially the 'harmful' status of the B-text – as well as by the sanctimoniousness of some of the play's critics, Empson attempted to reconstruct the 'original' text against the background of its known sources, the hermetic tradition, Marlowe's likeliest intentions and contemporary theatrical expectations. The result in *Faustus and the Censor* is a detailed and vigorous new reading. Faustus must no longer be seen as an overreaching dope who deserves eternal punishment: he is reinstated as a true

Renaissance hero, a resourceful and roguish magician who 'lives next door to Punch' and makes a business deal with the 'freelance' Mephistophiles. The 'mystery' of 'Meph', it transpires, is that he derives neither from Heaven nor Hell, but is a Middle Spirit, a spirit of nature; and to understand the play at all, Empson argues, you must appreciate its 'secret plan'. Empson aims to put the cat among the pietists, and the evidence from his researches and close criticism goes far to expand the possible meaning of the play. He concedes that 'most of this essay consists in scouting round for evidence, and thinking up supporting detail in plot or production'; but, even when he seems to be quite contrary, he is never less than enlivening.

The last two essays in the present collection are exciting collateral pieces, expatiating upon Empson's conviction that the Hermetic and magical lore – inherited from the ancients, mediated by sixteenth-century publications – was a vibrant source of inspiration to English dramatists of about 1590. (There is a further unpublished essay – on *The Jew of Malta* – which also relates to this elaborating interest; but unfortunately it is very obviously first-draft work, rudimentary and unrefined, and not fit for publication.) Frank Kermode, in his New Arden edition of *The Tempest* (1954), noted what he called 'a degree of interchangeability in the expressions "spirit" and "fairy"', and outlined in an appendix the elements of the spirit-world that Shakespeare must have taken from the systematic exposition of the 'dæmonic' hierarchy set out by the white magician Agrippa.²⁵ Empson, for his part, came to believe he had found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* evidence to suggest that Shakespeare comprehended heterodox theories both about intermediate spirits and about the Copernican revolution even as much as twenty years earlier, in 1590. Moreover, he was convinced that his exposition of these elements would rout the pervasive, pernicious influence of the brutalising argument of Jan Kott's chapter called 'Titania and the Ass's Head' (*Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, London: Methuen, 1964). Empson wrote in a draft passage of this exhilarating long essay – which I have given the title 'The spirits of the *Dream*' –

As I understand, there is a rather shadowy body of theory for producers, encouraging them to be original by saying that a play has an under-text, a secret intention of the author which ought to be followed rather than the literal words. This has some truth and should anyhow be encouraged, because it is much better than what the producers actually do. They use the

old plays as a quarry to supply a modern entertainment; very much as a statue worshipped with awe, danger and edification by a remote tribe may be mass-produced as a toy for children. This is what Kott is up to, while imagining that he is plunging to the heart of reality.

Jan Kott's effort to promote a dark, terrible, orgiastic view of the play is known to have been part of the inspiration behind Peter Brook's famously carnivalesque Royal Shakespeare production of 1970, which was in fact a sexy circus – a piece of chic, diverting virtuosity – that with benefit of hindsight we may see as a product of the all-licensing 1960s. (Nevertheless, it is odd that Kott's insistence on a grotesque sexuality in the play should have been transmuted by Brook into a nimble, inventive, but perhaps fundamentally substanceless, variety-performance.)

Empson deplored the Kott and Brook perversions of the play, and in a letter to Cambridge University Press spoke of his own interpretation as getting at the authentic historical moment – and the genuine challenge – of Shakespeare's prescient unconventionality:

I have a long article about the *Midsummer N. D.*, offering a way out from the Peter Brook outrage upon it; the spirits of nature need to be recognised as powers, and the decisive way to do it is to make Puck fly. To do this was one of the first technical triumphs of the Globe, which has an enlarged area for crane machinery on top . . . Also Puck tells us with hair-raising exactitude the time needed for Major Gagarin to make the first circuit of the earth in space. This cannot be a coincidence, especially as the slight error in it corresponds to the Elizabethan error in the size of the earth. [Thomas] Harriot must have arrived at this answer and been refused publication by the censor; it is agreed that he fell into some such trouble, soon after 1590, and reacted with such a tremendous sulk that he refused ever to publish again. His supporters had a slogan, and it somehow got brief mention in Shakespeare's play; but why? . . .²⁶

It is now widely believed, as by the editors of the latest Revels Plays edition of *Doctor Faustus* – that Marlowe must have been acquainted with the opinions on Copernicus of advanced thinkers such as Thomas Harriot, Giordano Bruno, and Thomas Digges, and exploited in his play the radically sceptical implications of the brave new astronomy (see also volume 1, *Donne and the New Philosophy*, for Empson's extensive writings on these progressive philosophers). David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen also assent to the likelihood that Marlowe penned his play at the early date of c. 1588–9, especially in view of the recent demand for plays about magicians

and their tricks.²⁷ Back in the 1970s, Empson drew like conclusions about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: in view of the nexus of interest in occult hermetism and revolutionary astronomy, magic, and Middle Spirits, he felt convinced that Shakespeare had written the earliest version of his play *not* between 1594 and 1596 (the parameters that historical critics debate to death) but by 1590.²⁸

The validity of Empson's claims remains to be weighed by the learned, but I believe there can be no doubt that his passionate, wide-branching exploration of the play and its putative intellectual context, which makes the arcane freshly accessible, is a real treat. It is notable, too, that in the years since Empson's death a number of critics and literary historians have felt eager to follow the trail blazed by Frances Yates in *The Occult Philosophy in Renaissance England* (1979). To cite one recent example: John S. Mebane in *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age* (1989) seeks to demonstrate that Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare were each 'thoroughly familiar with the philosophical, social, and political implications of Hermetic/Cabalistic magic, as well as with the claims of particular occult philosophers ...'²⁹ Perhaps Empson's most controversial contribution to the debate is his argument that Shakespeare had tumbled to the implications of philosophical occultism, and of the new astronomy, at the beginning of his career (and not only by the time of *The Tempest*, as most critics will allow); but it would surely be foolhardy for anyone to allege that Empson was out on a limb of his own invention.

David B. Pirie, when editing *Essays on Shakespeare*, took the prudent course of including in that volume only the briefer version entitled 'Fairy flight in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' (a review of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. for the Arden Shakespeare by Harold Brooks), first published in the *London Review of Books* in October 1979. The full text survives in numerous alternative versions; and, as David Pirie pointed out, one has to 'conclude that Empson had not produced in any of these drafts a complete text he judged ready for publication'.³⁰ Thus, in salvaging a version of the fuller essay for publication in this volume, my principal concern has been to work towards the most advanced state of the text; but the reader must appreciate that this exercise in recovery still falls short of a state that would have satisfied Empson. I have been encouraged to print this draft essay by a letter that Empson wrote to Cambridge University Press in August 1981 in which he specifically – and excitedly – refers