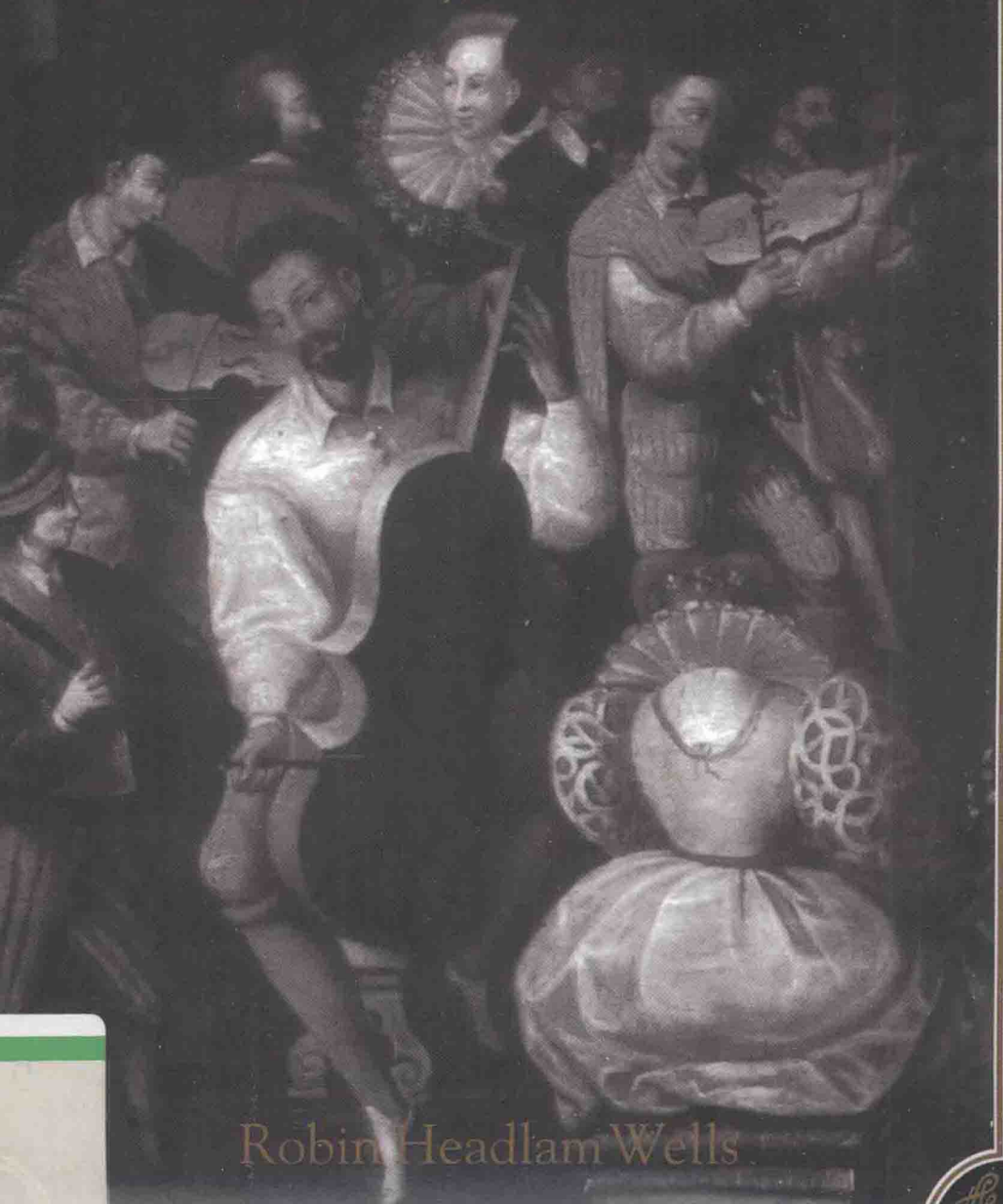


ELIZABETHAN MYTHOLOGIES

Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music



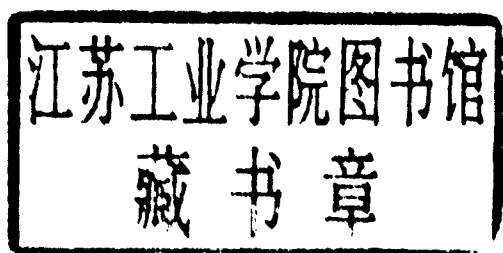
Robin Headlam Wells

ELIZABETHAN MYTHOLOGIES

Studies in poetry, drama and music

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for Jenny

Preface

The essays that go to make up this book were written over a number of years in between work on other projects. During this period the world of Renaissance studies has been transformed by the advent of new approaches to historical scholarship. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, as the American and the British versions of the new movement are known, owe much to the post-structuralist Marxism popularized by Louis Althusser and the revisionist historicism of his Sorbonne pupil Michel Foucault; they seek to locate Renaissance texts in contexts that are said to have been ignored or marginalized by traditional Renaissance scholarship. As Terence Hawkes puts it, 'the project involves ... reinserting [texts] into the cultural history of their own time ... and merging them back into the context of the circulating discourses from which "English" has prised them'.¹

My own debt to the new post-structuralist historicism will be evident if I say that I recognize that Elizabethan preoccupation with the power of words and music is the score, to borrow a metaphor of Althusser's, of an essentially ideological concert. What is not clear to me is how traditional scholarship, in recovering the psychological, social, political and intellectual environment in which the Renaissance writer lived and worked, has managed to prise literature free from its cultural context. Because I do not share Hawkes' contempt for the traditional historical scholarship on which the new historicisms are so heavily dependent,² I shall not be setting out to expose 'the resounding failure of ... humanist criticism' to provide a theoretical account of itself;³ nor do I intend to contribute to 'the current endeavour within radical criticism to contest and displace ... established interpretations of canonical literary works'.⁴ In fact, I shall not even attempt to impose a single thesis on the heterogeneous materials I discuss. Though I am

interested in the politics of art, I do not believe that the cause of criticism is best advanced by repeatedly putting the same questions: if you start from the premise that every text either colludes with or resists oppression (an approach that characterizes recent musical as well as literary criticism),⁵ it will not be surprising if you tend to come up with some rather predictable conclusions. If I am able to offer new readings of some Elizabethan plays, songs and other cultural artefacts, these are probably best seen, not as radical correctives to the ineptitudes of my predecessors in the field of Renaissance ideas of music and musical harmony, but as tributes to the work of critics whose originality and scholarship I cannot hope to emulate. Chief among these I count G. L. Finney, S. K. Heninger, Jr, John Hollander, James Hutton, Kathi Meyer-Baer, Claude V. Palisca, Bruce Pattison, Leo Spitzer, John Stevens, D. P. Walker and Frances Yates, though of course there are many more. I list those in my notes.

Inevitably some important works have appeared while this book was in press. Among them Peggy Muñoz Simonds' *Myth, Emblem, and Music in Shakespeare's 'Cymbeline'* and Brian Vickers' *Appropriating Shakespeare* require mention for the bearing they have on two of my central concerns in the pages that follow, the first for its learned treatment of the Orpheus myth in the Renaissance, the second for its relentlessly sceptical interrogation of the philosophical and linguistic bases of modern literary theory. Had they appeared a year or two earlier both would have saved me much time.

Over the years I have been working intermittently on these essays I have learnt much from the discussions of historicism, traditional and otherwise, that I have had with Tom McAlindon. I owe him special thanks. Friendly acknowledgment is also due to James Booth, Andrew Gurr, Owen Knowles, John Milsom, Anthony Pratt, Anthony Rooley, György Szőnyi, Bruce Woodcock, and Rowland Wymer for helpful criticism and advice; to Graham Sadler and Shirley Thompson for generous assistance with musical analysis and transcription; to Poppy Holden for showing me, in the course of our recitals, that the belief of Renaissance humanists in the magical power of song was not misplaced; and to Phil Lourie for helping me to understand the iconography of the orpharion and other instruments he built for me. I am also grateful to my anonymous publisher's readers for saving me from many errors. Those that

remain I attribute, not to the inscriptions of ideology, but to my own ignorance.

Acknowledgment of another kind is due to the British Academy for supporting my visit to the Huntington Library as an Exchange Fellow in Spring 1987, and to the Leverhulme Trust for generous assistance in meeting research and publication costs. I am grateful to all three institutions, and especially to the Huntington Library staff for their 'sweete semblaunt, friendly offices that bynde, / And all the complements of curtesie' (*Faerie Queene*, vi.x.23).

Chapter 1 first appeared in a different form in the *Huntington Library Quarterly*, chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8 in *Early Music*, and chapter 7 in *Music and Letters*. Chapter 2 is a substantially revised version of an article written in collaboration with Alison Birkinshaw and published in *Shakespeare Studies*. I am grateful to Oxford University Press and to the editors of these journals for permission to reprint articles in a revised form. For permission to reproduce material in their keeping I thank the Bodleian Library (illus. 2), The British Library (illus. 4, 28), Panton Cowen (illus. 7, 16), Groeningemuseum, Bruges (illus. 3), Keyserische Verlagsbuchhandlung (illus. 34), Librairie Larousse and Reed International Books (illus. 38), Phil Lourie (illus. 18, 22), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid and Bridgman Art Library (illus. 12), Museo del Tempio di Venere, Pompeii (illus. 33), Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (illus. 14), National Gallery, London (illus. 36), Princeton University Library (illus. 8), John Pringle (illus. 31, 32), Sadea editore, Florence (illus. 13), Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (illus. 35), Villa Farnese, Caprarola (illus. 5), Lawrence Witten (illus. 21).

Abbreviations

Periodicals and series

AM	<i>Annales Musicologiques</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
CE	<i>Cahiers Elisabethains</i>
CI	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
CJ	<i>Cambridge Journal</i>
CL	<i>Comparative Literature</i>
CLS	<i>Comparative Literature Studies</i>
CM	<i>Classica et medievalia</i>
CQ	<i>Critical Quarterly</i>
ECS	<i>Eighteenth-Century Studies</i>
EETS	<i>Early English Text Society</i>
ELH	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
ELR	<i>English Literary Renaissance</i>
EM	<i>Early Music</i>
EngM	<i>English Miscellany</i>
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
EStud	<i>Essays and Studies</i>
GSJ	<i>Galpin Society Journal</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IRASM	<i>International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JMT	<i>Journal of Music Theory</i>
JWCI	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
Lib	<i>The Library</i>
LRB	<i>London Review of Books</i>
LSJ	<i>Lute Society Journal</i>
ML	<i>Music and Letters</i>
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>

<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MQ</i>	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
<i>MR</i>	<i>Music Review</i>
<i>NLR</i>	<i>New Left Review</i>
<i>NQ</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>NYRB</i>	<i>New York Review of Books</i>
<i>OLR</i>	<i>Oxford Literary Review</i>
<i>PLMA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the London Musical Association</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PRMA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>RenQ</i>	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>Rhet</i>	<i>Rhetorica</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Romance Philology</i>
<i>RS</i>	<i>Renaissance Studies</i>
<i>SAQ</i>	<i>South Atlantic Quarterly</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Studies in English</i>
<i>SewR</i>	<i>Sewanee Review</i>
<i>ShS</i>	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
<i>Spec</i>	<i>Speculum</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>SQ</i>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
<i>SStud</i>	<i>Shakespeare Studies</i>
<i>StudR</i>	<i>Studies in the Renaissance</i>
<i>TAPS</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philosophical Society</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>Texas Review</i>
<i>UR</i>	<i>University Review</i>
<i>WA</i>	<i>World Archaeology</i>

Shakespeare's plays and poems

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
<i>AYL</i>	<i>As You Like It</i>
<i>Err.</i>	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>
<i>1H4</i>	<i>Henry IV, Part I</i>
<i>2H4</i>	<i>Henry IV, Part II</i>
<i>H5</i>	<i>Henry V</i>

3H6	<i>Henry VI, Part III</i>
Lr.	<i>King Lear</i>
Mac.	<i>Macbeth</i>
Meas.	<i>Measure for Measure</i>
Mer.V.	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
MND	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
Oth.	<i>Othello</i>
R2	<i>Richard II</i>
Sonn.	<i>Sonnets</i>
Troil.	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
Wint.	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>

Note: all quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*, original spelling edn, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); all quotations from Spenser are from *The Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, one-volume edn (Oxford University Press, 1912).

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Introduction

There's not the smallest orbe which thou beholdst
But in his motion like an Angell sings,
Still quiring to the young eyde Cherubins;
Such harmonie is in immortall soules,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Dooth grosly close it in, we cannot heare it.

(*Merchant of Venice*, v.i.60-5)

In this concert, one ideological State apparatus certainly has the dominant role, although hardly any one lends an ear to its music: it is so silent!

(Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses')

ELIZABETHAN WORLD PICTURES

In a lecture dedicated to the memory of Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams once admitted that he had spent years trying to escape from that notorious *bête noire* with which every student of English Literature has to do battle – the Elizabethan World Picture. It may have been a fascinating thing in itself, said Williams, but for him it often seemed to be more of a hindrance than a help when it actually came to reading the drama of the period.¹

The Elizabethan World Picture is the title E. M. W. Tillyard gave to a small book he published in 1943 as an offshoot of his influential *Shakespeare's History Plays*. It refers to that remarkable gramarye of post-medieval cosmological, political and ethical doctrine in which every educated Elizabethan was supposed to believe without demur or reservation. Fundamental to this world view is the idea of harmony: individual psychology, family relations, politics – all were evoked in musical metaphors; in fact it is a favourite maxim among Renaissance writers that the world itself is made of music. It is these

ideas, their representation in literature and other cultural forms, and their political appropriation that are my subject.

For some decades after its publication *The Elizabethan World Picture* was popularly regarded as the authoritative intellectual history of the period. This was in spite of the fact that the book had already begun to be challenged by the early 1950s on the grounds of its schematic and reductive view of Elizabethan habits of thought.² Over the next thirty years the sense that Tillyard had related only part of a highly complicated narrative was confirmed as specialists working in the closely related fields of Elizabethan cosmology, politics, legal theory and poetics all contributed to the task of completing the story he had begun.³ It has become clear from this expanded narrative that the later sixteenth century was a period characterized not so much by its unquestioning acceptance of a monolithic body of quasi-official doctrine as by its vigorous scepticism. What Tillyard took to be a unified world view commanding universal assent is perhaps better seen as a 'strategy of containment', to use Frederic Jameson's terms,⁴ a device whose ability to provide Elizabethan society with an intellectually and emotionally satisfying account of itself depended on the degree to which it was capable of effacing that society's underlying contradictions. As one of a number of competing ideologies, the so-called Elizabethan World Picture can be more accurately designated by a term that Tillyard himself used to describe a contemporary body of specifically historiographical and political doctrine – the Tudor Myth. When it is apparent that Tillyard's narrative deals, not with history, but with myth, the reasons for its elegant simplicity become clear. As Roland Barthes puts it in his seminal *Mythologies*, 'myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, without any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions'.⁵ Though this is not the way he himself saw it, it is in fact just such a world that Tillyard evokes in *The Elizabethan World Picture*.

THE MUSICIAN-KING

That the Elizabethans were quite capable of deconstructing their own myths of order is evident from a poem like *Hero and Leander*. Marlowe's poem survives only as a fragment. It breaks off at a

moment of extreme lyrical beauty when gods and mortals are apparently united in cosmic harmony. As the fated couple's first night of illicit love draws to its end Hero tries to hide herself, unhappy at the thought of a prying sun discovering her secret. But so dramatic is her transfiguration by the pleasures of 'this blessed night',⁶ that her radiance, filling the room with light, deceives Hesperus into thinking that it is time to prepare Apollo's chariot. And so before dawn is actually due to break, 'ougly night' is banished, the sun rises and the world is filled with the sound of celestial music. As the climax, both of love's inevitable course, and also of Marlowe's narrative, the scene is nothing less than an epiphany, a visionary revelation of the glories of youthful passion. But as is usually the case with such moments of intense lyrical beauty in Marlowe, it is a deeply ironic scene. Though Marlowe died before he could complete the story, its tragic conclusion is anticipated in another tale of illicit love that he tells in *Hero and Leander*. This is the story of Mercury and Herse.⁷

The Mercury story is a myth-of-origin. It explains why it is that Fate will always be hostile to poets and lovers. Fresh from his defeat of Argus, the precocious young god is captivated by the unspoilt charms of a country maiden. Mercury knows well that 'Maids are not wooed by brutish force and might, / But speeches full of pleasure and delight' (1.419-20) and deploys all his legendary rhetorical skills in his attempt to win her. Flattered though she is by such eloquent attentions, the shepherdess has enough presence of mind to impose a task on her illustrious lover as a price for submitting to his energetic charms. She demands that he steal a cup of nectar from the gods. Mercury is no innocent in the art of theft and audaciously helps himself from Jupiter's own cup. For his crime he is banished from heaven. However, Mercury is nothing if not enterprising and quickly plans his revenge: he persuades Cupid to intercede with the Destinies on his behalf. They agree; Saturn is reinstated on the throne that his son had usurped, and Mercury is readmitted to heaven. But this is not the end of the story. Angry at Mercury's subsequent ingratitude, the Destinies now revoke their decree and restore Jupiter, banishing Mercury once more from heaven. Such is Mercury's resource, however, that not even the cruel Destinies can suppress him for ever. But though they cannot prevent him gaining access to heaven's court, they still have the power to impose a curse on their disrespectful protégé. Their malediction is a mythological

account of why writers will always be poor and at odds with authority:

Yet as a punishment they added this,
That he and *Povertie* should alwaies kis.
And to this day is everie scholler poore,
Grosse gold, from them runs headlong to the boore.
Likewise the angrie sisters thus deluded,
To venge themselves on *Hermes*, have concluded
That *Midas* brood shall sit in Honors chaire,
To which the *Muses* sonnes are only heire:
And fruitfull wits that in aspiring are,
Shall discontent run into regions farre;
And few great lords in vertuous deeds shall joy,
But be surpris'd with every garish toy.
And still inrich the loftie servile clowne,
Who with incroching guile, keepes learning downe. (1.469–82)

Mercury is a complex figure. He is noted for his eloquence, and for his silence; he is a representative of order, and of trickery; he is a type of the probing intellect, and he is sexually precocious.⁸ His ambivalent character is symbolic of the dual nature of the arts of which he is patron. As Marlowe portrays him – libidinous, plausible, thieving, disrespectful – he is an embodiment of everything that authority finds most threatening. The story of his affair with Herse and his provocation of Fate serves in part to prepare the way for the tragic end that, as we know from Musaeus, awaits Hero and Leander. But Marlowe's story is more than just a racy myth-of-origin accounting for the fact that the course of true love never did run smooth: it is also an ironic inversion of the familiar humanist myth of the birth of civilization.

As an exemplar of the art of eloquence, Mercury is traditionally linked in humanist mythology with those symbolic founders of civilization, Amphion, Arion, and Orpheus. According to Horace it was Mercury who first tamed man's savage nature when he gave him the power of speech.⁹ The myth is well known to sixteenth-century readers.¹⁰ The Preface to Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560) embodies a representative version of it. Combining Christian theology with echoes of Ovid's account of the four ages of the world (*Metamorphoses*, 1.89–150), Wilson tells how fallen humanity was wooed from a state of nomadic barbarity by the civilizing power of eloquence. This is the reason, he says, why poets have represented Hercules as a figure of such great symbolic significance: