

Modern Critical Views

THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMATISTS

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



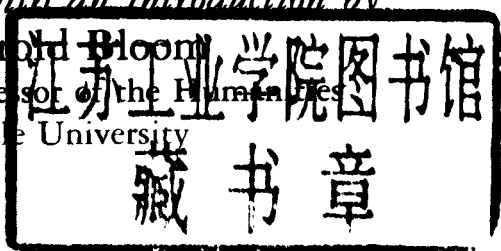
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Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together what its editor considers to be the best criticism available on the most significant Elizabethan dramatists, excluding Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson, to whom other books in this series are devoted. The editor is grateful to Douglas Smith for bringing to his attention some of these essays. They are arranged here in the chronological order of their publication.

The editor's introduction centers upon the Jacobean hero-villain, from Marlowe's Barabas through Shakespeare on to Marston, Tourneur, and Webster, with an excursus upon crucial later developments of this figure in Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Browning. It can be argued that the metamorphoses of such a figure are the principal legacy of Elizabethan drama for later English poetry, aside from the overwhelming influence of Shakespeare himself.

Jocelyn Powell's essay upon John Lyly defends the most "artificial" of the Elizabethan playwrights from judgments that he wearies the reader with elaborate ingenuities and rhetorical excesses. In Powell's view, Lyly plays elaborate symbolic games, and his multiple allusions work to manifest the mind's power over matter, and to illuminate the forces at play in our lives. In Scott McMillin's reading of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the virtually silent Old Man, who appears in just one scene of Act III, is taken as the trope or figure for Hieronimo's situation and fate. Related to this reading, but stressing even more the violence of Hieronimo's despairing assault upon language, is the analysis of Peter Sacks, who sees Hieronimo the avenger as a tragic Orpheus, both suffering and inflicting a *sparagmos*.

A very different Elizabethan triumph, Dekker's comedy *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, receives a careful exegesis by Harold E. Toliver, who finds in the play a craftsman's vision of a festive blessing "on the borderline between

innocence and irresponsibility." We move back to the dark world of revenge tragedy, with Alvin B. Kernan's classical analyses of "tragical satire" in Marston and Webster, and with G. Wilson Knight's Shakespearean description of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Darkness in the Jacobean mode elaborates with two complementary readings of the stoic tragedian George Chapman. Jackson I. Cope reads the tragicomedy *The Gentleman Usher* as a metaphysical and quasi-theological parable, while the Scottish poet Edwin Muir centers upon Chapman's heroes, Bussy D'Ambois and Byron, "unfallen men among the fallen," who yet lack Adamic virtues and possess, instead, the spirit and dignity of the stoic humanism of the Renaissance.

The darkest of all Jacobeans, Cyril Tourneur, is examined here in two contrasting essays upon *The Revenger's Tragedy*. L. G. Salingar, in relating the play to the Morality tradition, seeks to find a link with medieval conventions in the apparently wild and lawless Tourneur. This emphasis upon Tourneur's deliberate artistry is reinforced by B. J. Layman's remarks upon the design of the play, a design that seems to demonstrate an authentic nihilist's despair of human life and its possibilities.

Tragicomedy, the mode of much Shakespeare and some Chapman, is always associated with the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, whose characteristic rhetoric receives its classical treatment by Eugene Waith. Middleton, another darker eminence, wrote one masterpiece, the enigmatic *The Change-ling*, which is read by Muriel Bradbrook as possessing an almost Shakespearean control of action and characterization, as well as an admirable verbal "simplicity" wholly other than the ferocious rhetoric of Marston and Tourneur, and the elliptical sufferings of Webster.

Michael Neill's tracing of the social vision of Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* suggests ambiguities in Massinger's supposed cultural conservatism, which may be a mask for concealing the forms of impending change. In R. J. Kaufmann's bold summary of what is taken to be John Ford's "tragic perspective," the playwright's heroes are judged to be free of illusions about their own motives, and so Ford ceases to be "the purposeless and soulless opportunist of T. S. Eliot's caricature."

The final discussion, by the noted textual scholar Fredson Bowers, centers upon the "decadence of revenge tragedy" in James Shirley, the last stand of the Jacobean drama in an age dominated by John Dryden's more tempered Muse. Shirley's insistence upon having his characters do their thinking off stage is rightly seen as a retreat from much of what we value most greatly in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. With the plangent suggestion of a great tradition's dying fall, this volume reaches its appropriate end.

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Introduction

I

Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

The opening ferocity of Richard, still Duke of Gloucester, in *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, is hardly more than a fresh starting-point for the development of the Elizabethan and Jacobean hero-villain after Marlowe, and yet it seems to transform Tamburlaine and Barabas utterly. Richard's peculiarly self-conscious pleasure in his own audacity is crossed by the sense of what it means to see one's own deformed shadow in the sun. We are closer already not only to Edmund and Iago than to Barabas, but especially closer to Webster's Lodovico who so sublimely says: "I limn'd this nightpiece and it was my best." Except for Iago, nothing seems farther advanced in this desperate mode than Webster's Bosola:

O direful misprision!
I will not imitate things glorious,
No more than base: I'll be mine own example.—
On, on, and look thou represent, for silence,
The thing thou bear'st.

Iago is beyond even this denial of representation, because he does will silence:

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know;
From this time forth I never will speak word.

Iago is no hero-villain, and no shift of perspective will make him into one. Pragmatically, the authentic hero-villain in Shakespeare might be judged to be Hamlet, but no audience would agree. Macbeth could justify the description, except that the cosmos of his drama is too estranged from any normative representation for the term hero-villain to have its oxymoronic coherence. Richard and Edmund would appear to be the models, beyond Marlowe, that could have inspired Webster and his fellows, but Edmund is too uncanny and superb a representation to provoke emulation. That returns us to Richard:

Was ever woman in this humor woo'd?
Was ever woman in this humor won?
I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What? I, that kill'd her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit [at all]
And the plain devil and dissembling looks?
And yet to win her! All the world to nothing!
Hah!
Hath she forgot already that brave prince,
Edward, her lord, whom I, some three months since,
Stabb'd in my angry mood at Tewksbury?
A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman,
Fram'd in the prodigality of nature—
Young, valiant, wise, and (no doubt) right royal—
The spacious world cannot again afford.
And will she yet abase her eyes on me,
That cropp'd the golden prime of this sweet prince
And made her widow to a woeful bed?
On me, whose all not equals Edward's moi'ty?
On me, that halts and am misshapen thus?
My dukedom to a beggarly denier,

I do mistake my person all this while!
 Upon my life, she finds (although I cannot)
 Myself to be a marv'llous proper man.
 I'll be at charges for a looking-glass,
 And entertain a score or two of tailors
 To study fashions to adorn my body:
 Since I am crept in favor with myself,
 I will maintain it with some little cost.
 But first I'll turn yon fellow in his grave,
 And then return lamenting to my love.
 Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass,
 That I may see my shadow as I pass.

Richard's only earlier delight was "to see my shadow in the sun /And
 descant on mine own deformity." His savage delight in the success of his
 own manipulative rhetoric now transforms his earlier trope into the exultant
 command: "Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass, / That I may see
 my shadow as I pass." That transformation is the formula for interpreting
 the Jacobean hero-villain and his varied progeny: Milton's Satan, the Poet
 in Shelley's *Alastor*, Wordsworth's Oswald in *The Borderers*, Byron's Manfred
 and Cain, Browning's Childe Roland, Tennyson's Ulysses, Melville's Captain
 Ahab, Hawthorne's Chillingworth, down to Nathanael West's Shrike in *Miss
 Lonelyhearts*, who perhaps ends the tradition. The manipulative, highly self-
 conscious, obsessed hero-villain, whether Machiavellian plotter or later,
 idealistic quester, ruined or not, moves himself from being the passive sufferer
 of his own moral and/or physical deformity to becoming a highly active
 melodramatist. Instead of standing in the light of nature to observe his own
 shadow, and then have to take his own deformity as subject, he rather
 commands nature to throw its light upon his own glass of representation,
 so that his own shadow will be visible only for an instant as he passes on to
 the triumph of his will over others.

II

No figure in this tradition delights me personally more than Barabas,
 Marlowe's Jew of Malta, who so fittingly is introduced by Machiavel himself:

Albeit the world think Machiavel is dead,
 Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps,
 And now the Guise is dead, is come from France,
 To view this land, and frolic with his friends.

To some perhaps my name is odious,
But such as love me guard me from their tongues;
And let them know that I am Machiavel,
And weigh not men, and therefore not men's words.
Admired I am of those that hate me most.
Though some speak openly against my books,
Yet will they read me, and thereby attain
To Peter's chair: and when they cast me off,
Are poisoned by my climbing followers.
I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.
Birds of the air will tell murders past!
I am ashamed to hear such fooleries.
Many will talk of title to a crown:
What right had Caesar to the empire?
Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure
When, like the Draco's they were writ in blood.
Hence comes it that a strong-built citadel
Commands much more than letters can import;
Which maxim had but Phalaris observed,
H'had never bellowed, in a brazen bull,
Of great ones' envy. Of the poor petty wights
Let me be envied and not pitied!
But whither am I bound? I come not, I,
To read a lecture here in Britain,
But to present the tragedy of a Jew,
Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed,
Which money was not got without my means.
I crave but this—grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertained the worse
Because he favors me.

From Shakespeare's Richard III and Macbeth through Webster's Bosola and Flamineo on to Melville's Ahab and, finally, to West's Shrike, the descendants of Marlowe's Machiavel have held there is no sin but ignorance, and have become involuntary parodies of what ancient heresy called *gnosis*, a knowing in which the knower seeks the knowledge of the abyss. Nihilism, uncanny even to Nietzsche, is the atmosphere breathed cannily by the Jacobean hero-villain, who invariably domesticates the abyss. Barabas, Mach-

iavel's favorite, wins our zestful regard because of the Groucho Marxian vitalism of his deliciously evil self-knowings:

As for myself, I walk abroad a'nights
And kill sick people groaning under walls:
Sometimes I go about and poison wells;
And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,
I am content to lose some of my crowns,
That I may, walking in my gallery,
See 'em go pinioned along by my door.
Being young, I studied physic, and began
To practice first upon the Italian;
There I enriched the priests with burials,
And always kept the sexton's arms in ure
With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells:
And after that was I an engineer,
And in the wars 'twixt France and Germany,
Under pretense of helping Charles the Fifth,
Slew friends and enemy with my strategems.
Then after that was I an usurer,
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,
And tricks belonging unto brokery,
I filled the jails with bankrupts in a year,
And with young orphans planted hospitals,
And every moon made some or other mad,
And now and then one hang himself for grief,
Pinning upon his breast a long great scroll
How I with interest tormented him.
But mark how I am blessed for plaguing them;
I have as much coin as will buy the town.
But tell me now, how hast thou spent thy time?

The hyperboles here are so outrageous that Marlowe's insouciant identification with Barabas becomes palpable, and we begin to feel that this is how Tamburlaine the Great would sound and act if he had to adjust his overreachings to the limits of being a Jew in Christian Malta. Barabas is too splendidly grotesque a mockery to set a pattern for dramatic poets like Webster, Tourneur, Ford, and Middleton. They found their model for revenge tragedy in Kyd rather than Shakespeare, for many of the same reasons that they based their dark knowers upon Marston's Malevole in *The Malcontent* rather than upon Barabas. We begin to hear in Malevole what will culminate

in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and in Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Disdaining to take revenge upon his craven enemy, Mendoza, Malevole expresses a contempt so intense and so universal as to open up the abyss of nihilism:

O I have seene strange accidents of state,
 The flatterer like the Ivy clip the Oke,
 And wast it to the hart: lust so confirm'd
 That the black act of sinne it selfe not shamd
 To be termde Courtship.
 O they that are as great as be their sinnes,
 Let them remember that th'inconstant people,
 Love many Princes meerely for their faces,
 And outward shewes: and they do covet more
 To have a sight of these then of their vertues,
 Yet thus much let the great ones still conceale,
 When they observe not Heavens imposd conditions,
 They are no Kings, but forfeit their commissions.

That, for a Jacobean, leaves not much, and is the prelude to the hysterical eloquence of Tourneur's *Vindice the revenger*:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
 For doting on her beauty, though her death
 Shall be revenged after no common action.
 Does the silkworm expend her yellow labors
 For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
 Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
 For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?
 Why does yon fellow falsify highways
 And put his life between the judge's lips
 To refine such a thing, keeps horse and men
 To beat their valors for her?
 Surely we're all mad people and they,
 Whom we think are, are not: we mistake those.
 'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.

Does every proud and self-affecting dame
 Camphor her face for this, and grieve her maker
 In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves
 For her superfluous outside—all for this?

Who now bids twenty pound a night, prepares
 Music, perfumes and sweetmeats? All are hushed,
 Thou may'st lie chaste now! It were fine, methinks,
 To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts
 And unclean brothels; sure 'twould fright the sinner
 And make him a good coward, put a reveler
 Out of his antic amble,
 And cloy an epicure with empty dishes.
 Here might a scornful and ambitious woman
 Look through and through herself; see, ladies, with false forms
 You deceive men but cannot deceive worms.
 Now to my tragic business. Look you, brother,
 I have not fashioned this only for show
 And useless property, no—it shall bear a part
 E'en in its own revenge. This very skull,
 Whose mistress the duke poisoned with this drug,
 The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged
 In the like strain and kiss his lips to death.
 As much as the dumb thing can, he shall feel;
 What fails in poison we'll supply in steel.

It takes some considerable effort to recall that Vindice is addressing the skull of his martyred mistress, and that he considers her, or any woman whatsoever, worth revenging. These remarkable lines were much admired by T. S. Eliot, and one sees why; they are close to his ideal for dramatic poetry, and their intense aversion to female sexuality suited his own difficult marital circumstances during one bad phase of his life. What the passage clearly evidences is that Vindice is a true Jacobean hero-villain; he is more than skeptical as to the value of his own motivations, or of anyone else's as well. But this is hardly the historical skepticism that scholars delight in tracing; it has little to do with the pragmatism of Machiavelli, the naturalism of Montaigne, or the Hermeticism of Bruno. The horror of nature involved, whatever Tourneur's personal pathology, amounts to a kind of Gnostic asceticism, akin to the difficult stance of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Perhaps the hero-villain, like Milton's Satan, is truly in rebellion against the God of the Jews and the Christians, the God of this world.

III

Though the central tradition of the hero-villain goes directly from Shakespeare through Milton on to the High Romantics and their heirs, we

might be puzzled at certain strains in Browning, Tennyson, Hawthorne, and Melville, if we had not read John Webster's two astonishing plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Russell Fraser memorably caught Webster's curious link to Marlowe, whom he otherwise scarcely resembles:

His violent protagonists are memorable as they are endowed with the same amoral energy with which Barabas and Tamburlaine and Mortimer are endowed. Unlike these Marlovian heroes or hero-villains, they do not speak to us—quoting from Michael Drayton's tribute to Marlowe—of "brave translunary things," rather of the charnel house and the grisly business appurtenant to it.

Here is the death scene of Flamineo, and of his sister, Vittoria Corombona, in *The White Devil*:

VIT. COR. Oh, my greatest sin lay in my blood!

Now my blood pays for't.

FLAM.

Thou'rt a noble sister!

I love thee now. If woman do breed man,

She ought to teach him manhood. Fare thee well.

Know, many glorious women that are famed

For masculine virtue have been vicious,

Only a happier silence did betide them.

She hath no faults who hath the art to hide them.

VIT. COR. My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,

Is driven I know not whither.

FLAM.

Then cast anchor.

Prosperity doth bewitch men, seeming clear,

But seas do laugh, show white, when rocks are near.

We cease to grieve, cease to be fortune's slaves,

Nay, cease to die, by dying. Art thou gone?

And thou so near the bottom? False report,

Which says that women vie with the nine Muses

For nine tough durable lives! I do not look

Who went before, nor who shall follow me;

No, at myself I will begin and end.

While we look up to heaven, we confound

Knowledge with knowledge. Oh, I am in a mist!

VIT. COR. Oh, happy they that never saw the court,

Nor ever knew great men but by report!

VITTORIA *dies*.

FLAM. I recover like a spent taper, for a flash,
And instantly go out.

Let all that belong to great men remember the
old wives' tradition, to be like the lions i' the
Tower on Candlemas-day: to mourn if the sun
shine, for fear of the pitiful remainder of
winter to come.

'Tis well yet there's some goodness in my death;
My life was a black charnel. I have caught
An everlasting cold; I have lost my voice
Most irrecoverably. Farewell, glorious villains!
This busy trade of life appears most vain,
Since rest breeds rest where all seek pain by pain.
Let no harsh flattering bells resound my knell;
Strike, thunder, and strike loud, to my farewell!

Dies.

Vittoria Corombona rides her black ship to Hell without final knowledge, but Flamineo is a knower, a Machiavel in the high Marlovian sense, which has its Gnostic aspect. By beginning and ending "at myself," Flaminio seeks to avoid a final agon between his self-knowledge and a rival Christian knowledge: "While we look up to heaven, we confound / Knowledge with knowledge." And yet, Flamineo cries out: "Oh, I am in a mist!", which is what it is to the confounded, and perhaps leads to the self-epitaph: "My life was a black charnel." The mist appears also in the death speech of a greater hero-villain than Flamineo, Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*:

In a mist; I know not how;
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. Oh, I am gone.
We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves
That ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well;
It may be pain, but no harm to me to die
In so good a quarrel. Oh, this gloomy world,
In what shadow, or deep pit of darkness
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live?

Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
 To suffer death or shame for what is just.
 Mine is another voyage.

Dies.

Bosola's final vision is of the cosmic emptiness, what the Gnostics called the *kenoma*, into which we have been thrown: "a shadow, or deep pit of darkness." When Bosola dies, saying: "Mine is another voyage," he may mean simply that he is not suffering death for what is just, unlike those who have "worthy minds." But this is Bosola, master of direful misprision, whose motto is: "I will not imitate things glorious, / No more than base; I'll be mine own example." This repudiation of any just representation of essential nature is also a Gnostic repudiation of nature, in favor of an antithetical quest: "On, on: and look thou represent, for silence, / The thing thou bearest." What Bosola both carries and endures, and so represents, by a kind of super-mimesis, is that dark quest, whose admonition, "on, on" summons one to the final phrase: "Mine is another voyage." As antithetical quester, Bosola prophesies Milton's Satan voyaging through Chaos towards the New World of Eden, and all those destructive intensities of wandering self-consciousness from Wordsworth's Solitary through the Poet of *Alastor* on to their culmination in the hero-villain who recites the great dramatic monologue, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came":

Burningly it came on me all at once,
 This was the place! those two hills on the right,
 Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;
 While to the left, a tall scalped mountain . . . Dunce,
 Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,
 After a life spent training for the sight!

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
 The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
 Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
 In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf
 Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf
 He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

Not see? because of night perhaps?—why, day
 Came back again for that! before it left,
 The dying sunset kindled through a cleft: