

Some brief 'Concluding Remarks', seeking to show the pertinence of Maximian thought to twenty-first century concerns, relate a 'Christocentric cosmology' to the topics of human rights and the environment. The discussion is too condensed to be more than suggestive, but certainly Tollefsen is right to suppose that Christian reflection on these themes should be full-bloodedly theological and not a parroting of secular rectitudes.

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**REVENGE TRAGEDY AND THE DRAMA OF COMMEMORATION IN REFORMING ENGLAND** by Thomas Rist (*Ashgate Publications*, 2008) Pp. 165, £50

Thomas Rist's monograph is a recent addition to Ashgate's *Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama* series. Its aim is to counter the theory, advanced during the 1970s by Ronald Broude and others, that the genre of revenge tragedy, popular during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, was the vehicle for Protestant sentiments about the providential deliverance of England from the Church of Rome. Rist's close reading of several dramatic texts argues that, while they may appear superficially to denounce Roman-type ceremonial, they frequently draw attention to the need for remembrance of the dead.

After a substantial introduction in which Rist sets out his thesis and the "Broudeian" arguments he wishes to challenge, the book falls into three sections. Chapter One deals with *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, emphasising their insistence on the need for a due expression of grief after bereavement. The second chapter, "Funerary Theatre", examines Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and the relationship between St. Paul's and its liturgical theatre, and the final chapter widens its scope slightly to examine plays by Webster, Middleton and Tourneur, *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Atheist's Tragedy*.

Rist concentrates on the Reformed opposition to prayers for the dead and the Protestant insistence, following logically from that prohibition, on the utmost plainness and sobriety in the conduct of funerals. As the use of candles, dirges, processions and all but the briefest of prayers were strongly discouraged, plays that contain scenes of passionate mourning or in which characters complain of truncated funeral rites might, he argues, signify a popular protest against the extremes of the recommended Calvinist funerary arrangements. Rist's attitude towards the texts is exemplary in its close attention to detail, and one would not wish to quarrel with his general contention that, for instance, *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Hamlet* seem to assert very forcefully that to omit due ceremony to the dead is to court resentment and possibly insanity: Ophelia's madness is, after all, explicitly attributed to the shock of her father's death and "hugger-mugger" interment. Remembrance is also obviously a key theme of both plays. However, the funeral of Hamlet's father is not an issue and his "remembering" calls for action other than mourning. The need for suitably honourable burial had been a major theme of classical tragedy, and the revenge play had roots deep in the Senecan drama that was part of the set reading in Tudor schools. Moreover, apart from the classical provenance of the funeral motif, an implied indignation at sparse ceremony and repressed shows of sorrow is as likely to be simply anti-Puritan as definitely pro-Catholic.

While one certainly sympathises with analysis that challenges the Whiggish style of literary criticism that was prevalent for most of the last century, a style of criticism here represented by Broude, one must also allow that most recent literary studies of the early modern and post-Reformation period now acknowledge that there was not a clearly delineated break between the artistic expressions of the

traditional and the new religions. To be fair to Broude, he did a service to the study of revenge tragedy by pointing out, in his article "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 28 (1975) 38–58) that the term "revenge drama" is a modern one and conditions our understanding of the plays concerned as much as it reflects it, and there is much to be said for his interpretation of revenge drama as essentially declarative of the maxim "Time trieth Truth". Admittedly, Broude's idea of Truth was a Protestant one, and he would perhaps have taken a dim view of the fact that the maxim was a favourite of Thomas More's, but it remains true that the structure of the paradigmatic revenge drama tends to follow the classical pattern of a period of violence and chaos followed by the restoration of societal equilibrium as a result of the deaths of most, if not all, of the *dramatis personae* who had a hand in the violence.

Rist is right to draw attention to textual references in *Hamlet* to remembrance and there are several that seem to endorse prayer for the dead, but, oddly, he does not make much of this point. It seems ungracious to cavil at Rist's meticulous recording of such references, but it appears, in his dealings with Shakespeare at least, that he ignores the more significant things that are going on in a play, which argue more compellingly against a Broudean interpretation. In his treatment of *Titus Andronicus*, for example, he suggests that Lavinia, because she has been raped, is, according to a sort of dramatic semantics, equivalent to a dead Lavinia, who is therefore a fit subject of remembrance. This is not only unnecessarily complicated, it completely negates the powerful visual effect of the living Lavinia, who, with her tongue and hands chopped off, is as eloquent a figure as could be desired of a Church ravished and mutilated at the hands of iconoclasts. Rist goes so far as explicitly to reject (p. 60) the suggestion of other commentators that some of the play's final words have Pauline overtones. Marcus proposes to teach the Romans

...how to knit again

This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,

These broken limbs again into one body (*Titus* V.iii.70–72)

which seems to me, as to others, to have a distinctly ecclesial connotation, but Rist prefers to interpret the lines as bearing a eucharistic reference instead. There is a present tendency in early modern literary studies to see eucharistic references all over the place, and Rist's treatment of a passage in *Antonio's Revenge* where blood is sprinkled on a tomb, is a case in point. *Antonio's Revenge* is an undistinguished and overwritten play and much of the action is messy rather than meaningful. Rist himself remarks "This crucial passage is a nexus of religious suggestiveness pointing in at least two opposing directions" (p. 88), which is a kind way of saying that it is incoherent. If the sprinkled blood has any association with the Eucharist, it is extremely likely, in this play, to be hostile. There are indeed many dramatic scenes by several authors in which handkerchiefs are dipped in blood and this is almost certainly a Catholic reference, not to the Eucharist but to the practice of obtaining the blood of martyrs on the scaffold as relics. (One recalls the story of the man who, accidentally splashed by Edmund Campion's blood at his execution, was moved to embrace Catholicism.)

*Revenge Tragedy* is a work of impressive scholarship and close textual analysis which, one feels, deserves a larger subject. In the conclusion to his study Rist allows that his findings have been mixed: reminiscences of traditional religion, as may be observed in the dramas treated in the later part of the book, carry ironies along with their remembrances. In all, a reader agreeing that Rist's point is quite convincingly made might wonder whether it was necessary to expend so much effort in refuting a case which is by now regarded as out of date.

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