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The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare, by Harry Keyishian

Richard T. Brucher

University of Maine - Main, richard.brucher@umit.maine.edu

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Harry Keyishian. *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995. ix + 182 pp. \$39.95.

Harry Keyishian's stated purpose in *The Shapes of Revenge* is deceptively modest. He hopes his "study makes it difficult to speak too glibly either of the sinfulness of revenge or the virtue of forgiveness in Shakespeare's work" (167). The book does a deal more than that. It contests directly the pieties that too often characterize discussions of English Renaissance revenge plays: that revenge is immoral, unethical, and crazed, and that forgiveness is sublime. Contrary to the late-twentieth-century ring of "victimization" in his subtitle, Keyishian conducts his argument in early modern terms. Against the conservative moral and political tracts usually invoked to condemn revenge, he enlists books on the passions by Aristotle, Bacon, and Thomas Wright, among others. Revenge is a salutary impulse, arising naturally in response to grievous, humiliating, and unjust injuries. Anger properly channeled toward retribution, and not driven by narcissistic vindictiveness, can help an assaulted, disintegrating personality recuperate. The violent careers of Titus Andronicus and Hamlet display the ultimately healing qualities of revenge; the short, unhappy lives of characters like the Duchess of Gloucester (in *Richard II*) and Ophelia make painfully clear the high "costs of revengelessness" (26).

Keyishian applies this psychology of revenge to a familiar theory of characterization. Dramatic characters are "imaginary beings" who display "sets of values, commitments, goals, fears, habits, and temperaments" (13). These assumptions enable Keyishian to examine

a wide variety of depictions of legitimate and illegitimate grievances, and they support his argument that Shakespeare, whatever his own ideologies might have been, was deeply interested in situations that place human psyches under severe emotional pressures. Consequently, we have chapters on "Victimization" and "Vindictiveness," as well as on "Redemptive Revenge in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*," "Problematic Revenge in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*," and "Varieties of Revenge in the First Tetralogy," to name five of the book's eight chapters. The book frequently pauses over individual characters, using Renaissance psychology to illuminate their dilemmas and behaviors in fresh ways that prompt re-readings (e.g., Lear positively, Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* negatively).

As well as its thesis, the book's broad scope (covering tragedies, histories, comedies, romances, and a few poems) will stir the ire of those scholars who see revenge in moral, tragic terms only. Keyishian's implicit targets are the relatively narrow arguments of Eleanor Prosser (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 1971) and Charles and Elaine Hallett (*The Revenger's Madness*, 1980); he deploys current ideas to reassess the effects of revenge on audiences. For example, his reading of passion literature affirms arguments by Jonathan Dollimore (*Radical Tragedy*, 1984) and Catherine Belsey (*The Subject of Tragedy*, 1985) that revenge created subcultures that challenged traditional authorities and helped dispossessed victims achieve social reintegration. Revengers are often the sane beings in insane worlds, and their plays' sensitivities to their violations tend to engage audiences sympathetically in their empowering retaliations. Keyishian lingers over *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, arguing persuasively that Titus

and Hamlet are perhaps least deranged where conventional moral literature insists they are most immoral and mad.

The Shapes of Revenge makes a valuable contribution to the literature on revenge. Without malice it corrects cautionary readings of the revenge tragedies, and it discusses insightfully the politics and personalities of revenge in the histories and Roman plays. The emphasis on compelling passion goes a long way toward reconciling ancient conflicts that attend depictions of revenge: moral revulsion, emotional sympathy, and vicarious liberation. Keyishian writes forthrightly, compassionately, and often wittily on this intriguing subject.

RICHARD BRUCHER

University of Maine, Orono

Katharine Eisaman Maus. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 222 pp. \$37.50 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

Maus starts with Hamlet's soliloquy on the disparity between the external rituals of mourning and the inwardness of bitter anguish, a disparity of signs and what they signify. Truth is for Hamlet unspeakable, and any attempt to express it in the theater or elsewhere is doomed to failure as a devaluation of the inexpressible; the theater is too patently a place of illusion. Maus's question that follows upon this perception is to ask what to make of the gap "between an unexpressed interior and a theatricalized exterior" (2) in drama of the English Renaissance.

The distinction of exterior and interior is of course a familiar topic, one that (as in *Hamlet*) is usually there to privilege the interior and private. The result is a commonplace of alienation between the individual and other peo-

ple, between the individual's private passions and what others make of such a person. How is one, then, to accurately read another human being? Deception can be both intentional and unintentional. How do we know what others are thinking? The question touches issues of religious faith as well. Renaissance religious culture privileged inwardness while also seeing it as elusive. Many writers of the period openly yearned for techniques of more incisive discovery of knowing the inside.

What is new about the Renaissance in dealing with this aged problem, Maus argues, is a sense of urgency and consequentiality in a time of religious and social conflict. Various parties contended over the significance of signs in human behavior, over how humans ought to comport themselves. They argued as to whether conscientious dissidents ought to conceal their true identities from suspicious authorities. Many chose to die rather than betray their inner selves by outward conformity. Hence the centrality of the issue of equivocation. Casuistry is manifestly at odds with modern speech-act theory. An elaborate espionage system under Walsingham drove dissidents of widely varying persuasions into deceptive stratagems. Urbanization added to the pressure by disorienting private life.

Maus sees herself as indebted to many recent critics like Catherine Belsey, Jonathan Goldberg, Peter Stallybrass, and Patricia Fumerton, while distancing herself from their preoccupation with the public and political spheres at the expense of the inner. Much New Historicism is suspicious of the self in any subjective, interiorized sense, and prefers to look at the self as a product of its relations. Maus nicely places herself in reference to this prevailing ideology. This has important consequences for Maus in terms of the interior spaces of