

Chris McMahon. *Family and the State in Early Modern Revenge Drama: Economies of Vengeance.*

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The last decade has seen a revival of critical interest in the early modern revenge play. This work, part of Routledge's series in Renaissance Literature and Culture, makes a worthwhile contribution to this reinvigorated field.

The book is organized into seven chapters: an introduction, five chapters focused on readings of individual plays, and a brief conclusion. McMahon suggests that criticism of revenge plays has failed to devote sustained attention to the representation of families and the relationship of these families to state authority. He also proposes a methodology for using anthropological theories of value to read these plays, not simply as economic metaphors, but as an actual series of transactions. McMahon suggests the plays produce a dialectic that "advances the legitimacy of the family as a private unit because the family augments the state 'organism'" and "seeks to empower the family as an informal state apparatus" (6).

In his introduction, McMahon provides a detailed theoretical framework that draws particularly from Marx, Bourdieu, and Girard, although his thinking also displays the influence of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and New Historicism. There are times that the work feels slightly oversaturated with different theoretical structures, although McMahon is always clear in his handling of theorists and his logic for employing each approach. Each chapter is divided into sections headed by a summary of the contents, an organization that can seem a bit disjointed. However, McMahon handles his engagement with critical scholarship and early modern

textual contexts in a nuanced manner and his core arguments remain comprehensible and intriguing.

Examining *The Spanish Tragedy*, McMahon notes the tension between king and magistrate as candidates for the people's representative in political discourse and suggests that the play imagines state reform as a way to deal with the impacts of family privatization. In contrast, McMahon reads *Hamlet* as a play in which family and state both support primogeniture as a nonviolent means of resolving conflicts, in part through a critique of elective processes that serves to reassure audiences about the coming Stuart succession. One interesting result of McMahon's approach is his reading of Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" speech as a critique of the "mercantile logic" that displays, McMahon suggests, Polonius's poor household management (77).

His discussions of *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Malcontent* are slightly confusing in terms of chronology. Despite his own admission that *The Malcontent* is likely the earlier play, he discusses *The Revenger's Tragedy* as anticipating Marston's work and *The Malcontent* responding to themes in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Despite the intriguing work he does with these texts (suggesting among other things that *The Revenger's Tragedy* can be read as a "morally educational text," rather than simply a parodic one), the attempt to construct a continuity into an earlier text feels a bit disjointed (110).

McMahon reads *The Duchess of Malfi* as a radical revisiting of the value of the private family, suggesting that the family unit exerts civic authority by controlling its boundaries. For McMahon the play promotes the need for rulers to listen to meritorious counsel, perhaps modeling the interaction of king and Parliament. In addition, he suggests that the play ultimately positions the private family as beyond vengeance. McMahon's approach to reading these plays provides some telling insights and suggests a more concrete way of examining the relations between private family and governmental structures.

At times, this study pushes claims perhaps farther than can be fully supported. For instance, in discussing the final judgments in *The Malcontent*, McMahon problematically argues that "Altofront therefore uses mercy as a mode of symbolic violence" (140). Also, the role of covert surveillance, presented by McMahon as key to Altofronto's success in managing the state and the household, is not clearly addressed in his discussion of the Duchess of Malfi's successful household administration. This might be, in part, a consequence of gender, which McMahon does acknowledge, but it seems a gap in what is otherwise a very carefully structured argument.

Despite these moments of unevenness, however, McMahon provides some compelling readings, as well as a nicely developed approach to the texts. This book is valuable for scholars working on revenge, family, or state authority in early modern drama and a worthwhile addition to an early modernist's bookshelf.

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