

## SBReview\_16:

Woodbridge, Linda. *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xvi + 332 pp. \$95.00. ISBN: 0521884594.

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We have known for a long time that revenge was very much on the minds of early modern dramatic audiences. In 1903, Ashley H. Thorndike delineated the revenge tragedy genre for us to note that in writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was refining materials much used by his contemporaries. Fredson Bowers gave the topic magisterial treatment in his 1940, acknowledging that playwrights held a variety of attitudes toward theatrical revenge, but concluding that audience opinion generally opposed revenge on religious grounds. This viewpoint was carried forward in well-researched studies by Eleanor Prosser (1971) and Charles and Elaine Hallett (1980), for whom the desire for revenge represented evil and/or madness. The counter case—the idea that revengers could be portrayed and perceived as heroic—was taken up by such writers and Ronald Broude (in a series of important articles in the 1950s) and J. W. Lever (in *The Tragedy of State*, 1987), who argued that audiences responded differently to theatrical performances than they did to church sermons. John Kerrigan (in *Revenge Tragedy*, 1996) has shown that revenge and retribution have been crucial themes throughout history of Western culture. More recently Lorna Hutson, in *The Invention of Suspicion* (2007), a study of forensic technique in early modern law and theater, concluded “the passion for revenge expressed in late sixteenth-century drama it not different in kind from a passion for justice.” (This hasty summary omits much excellent writing on the topic, for which I offer apologies to many scholars.)

Linda Woodbridge’s extensively documented, energetically argued volume carries the point home and advances our understanding considerably by linking the early modern obsession with revenge to developments in contemporary economic, political, and religious thought. Defining “revenge drama” across traditional genres, as works that include a revenge plot, whether comic or tragic, she offers a stunning array of examples, ranging from Seneca (popularized through translation) through to the Civil War and Interregnum. For her, the frequent appearance of revenge on stage was no mere theatrical fashion, but a product of social conditions, fleshing out her thesis that “The Renaissance taste for revenge was largely a response to grievances: inflation, an unfair judicial system, economic inequity” (p 222). Observing that revenge was the most popular theme in

early modern drama, and that plays about revenge tended to run longer, sell more copies, and be quoted from and revived more often than any other form of drama (p. 4), she suggests that “The prevalence of revenge in plays can be ascribed partly to the frequency with which the Tudor pursuit of justice ended in disappointment” (p. 110). (“Unfairness was like the weather: everybody talked about it” [6].)

What a cauldron is the period she evokes! The populace is enraged by the prevalence of social and economic injustice; major rebellions engage thousands in acts of insurrection throughout the sixteenth century; religions clash on the deadliest terms; resistance writers—including Catholics, Puritans, radical playwrights, printers, and (even) translators of Seneca—condemn tyranny and, indirectly, monarchy itself. People are infuriated by all forms of injustice—unrewarded merit, unmerited reward, unpunished guilt, undeserved punishment. They want justice. And they want revenge. And in plays, they find that these are sometimes identical.

In characterizing revenge plays as manifestations of a hunger for justice, Woodbridge builds on her previous work in early modern economics, citing the period’s growing interest in bookkeeping, accountancy, inventories, and the regulation of trade. Stage revengers are good at these arts and sciences; they are consumed with equivalencies. As Woodbridge amply demonstrates, “Revenge speaks a language of debt and obligation” (p. 93) and stage revengers are obsessed with lending, making even, being indebted; about profit and loss; about foreclosures, defaults, and inflation. Debt and revenge are both “all about paying back” (p. 96). “The language of owing pervaded life” (p. 105). “What punishment/Shall we invent sufficient to inflict/According to the height of our revenge?” (p. 110), asks a calculating revenger from *Swetnam The Woman-bater*. Woodbridge argues vigorously and wittily against the view that acts of dramatic revenge were condemned by early modern audiences, noting that the confusion of plays with sermons has produced many distorted readings of plays by assuming that a dramatic character’s act of, or even desire for, revenge automatically stamped him or her as a villain or a madman. She, instead, finds glee in the antics of stage revengers and sees audiences celebrating them rather than being repelled. Woodbridge distinguishes between vendetta plays, in which characters of equal rank feud, and “individual grievance” plays, in which the dispossessed take on tyrants (p. 165). Shakespeare’s first historical tetralogy is an example of the former sort, while *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* represent the latter, which interest her more because they reinforce the revolutionary potential of revenge plays. The plays were frequently sensational, she admits, but the playwrights were not

“cheap sensationalists.” They were often sincere and committed dissidents: “Many revenge plays stage violence in the service of resistance” (p. 185).

Woodbridge ties revenge plays into a tradition on resistance writing that included Jean Ponet (who toted up the many tyrants lawfully killed in the The Bible: page 141); William Baldwin, whose collection *The Mirror for Magistrates* dwelt on the “vices . . . punished in great princes” (p. 154); and the Scot George Buchanan, who proposed electing kings for merit (p. 158), anathema though that position was to his former student, James I of England. Even the study of mathematics had a leveling influence, its severe impartiality discrediting the legal proposition that social class was a factor in allocating punishment in criminal proceedings.

Does she sometimes overplay her hand? Possibly. The connection between revenge plays and revolution may be less direct than she suggests. But hear her out. The range and detail of her references is astonishing, whether to primary and secondary sources or contemporary theoretical positions. She writes enlighteningly about Arab mathematics, English law, the history of translation, Puritan polemics, religious controversies, piling on her evidence thickly and overwhelmingly, with energy, gusto, and humor. This is a bracing read.

A specialist in English Renaissance literature, Linda Woodbridge began her academic career in the Department of English at the University of Alberta after finishing her studies at UCLA (B.A., 1966, M.A., 1968, Ph.D., 1970). While there, she wrote one of the very first feminist essays on Shakespeare, “Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism” (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1977), among many other periodical publications, as well as the first of her seven books, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984), which is still her most cited study. Like much of her work, *Women and the English Renaissance* explored little-known or under-studied texts, and authors and characters that were often undeservedly passed over. She also co-edited *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in the Age of Shakespeare* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992) and produced her second sole-authored book, *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1994), which traced the impact of folk superstitions and folk medicine on the works of major authors of the time.