

Arthur C. Kirsch. *Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1972. Pp. xii, 134. \$7.50.

At the beginning of this stimulating and often incisive study, Arthur C. Kirsch observes that our understanding of Jacobean drama can be much enhanced if its critics remember that it is not just a re-run of Elizabethan drama. Jacobean drama has its own distinctive attributes, Kirsch rightly emphasizes, and *Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives* attempts to illuminate a wide range of Jacobean plays by tracing the effects of some of these unique attributes. Three interrelated phenomena in particular are seen as having a profound shaping influence on the form of the drama: the growth of Fletcherian tragicomedy, the earlier vogue for satiric drama, and the sociological factor that reinforced both of these generic developments, the rise of the coterie theatre. Kirsch argues that all three phenomena contributed to a highly self-conscious dramaturgy in which plot, style, and actors (all boys, in the early years of the coterie theatres) called attention to themselves and to the playwright's manipulative skill. Chapter One ingeniously brings together Guarini (who "baptized Renaissance tragicomedy if he did not actually create it") and Jonson (founder of satirical comedy), two opposite but complementary sources of the new dramaturgy; the chapter explores quite perceptively the self-conscious theatricalism on which *The Pastor Fido* and Jonson's humours plays turn such different variations. Later chapters show both strains interacting in the works of Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare (who is seen as fusing the strains uneasily in *All's Well* and later triumphantly in *Cymbeline*), and Middleton. Finally, chapters on Webster and Ford work mainly to probe the limitations of the new dramaturgy: *The White Devil* and *The Broken Heart* are interpreted as aesthetically chaotic plays that have lost their integrity in a maze of posturings; art's mirror has been overwhelmed by its cumbersome frame.

In addition to the three theatrical phenomena mentioned in Kirsch's Introduction, one further "perspective" emerges in the course of his study. With it come problems, for this reviewer at least, that qualify the book's usefulness. The Conclusion gives an abstract of this last perspective. Essentially, Kirsch asserts, Elizabethan drama is "informed by a Boethian conception of Fate and Providence, the former an understanding of human events having discernible causes and effects in time, the latter an heavenly or supernatural disposition of events which exists outside time in an eternal present." This conception, which sustains and unifies the structure of Elizabethan plays, disappears in Jacobean drama, and the typical Jacobean play quite literally falls apart. For confirmation, Kirsch turns to Coleridge's contrasting descriptions of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays as "mere aggregations without unity," and of Shakespearean drama as possessing "a keynote which guides and controls the harmonies throughout." Kirsch's theory is an intriguing one, but he never really argues it: it achieves full statement only in his Conclusion, and before then it acts only as a consistent bias in his evaluations. Thus, Middleton is seen as conquering what we may term – with apologies to Robert Ornstein – the Amoral Myopia of Jacobean Drama by turning to the morality play for a structure that fits theatrical intrigue into a process of moral definition, so that "a perfect symmetry governs Middleton's better plays"; while Beaumont and Fletcher succumb in their tragicomedies to a stress upon artifice for its own sake, only redeeming themselves in their comedies, which are "less guilty of trifling with ideas." But surely when a critic finds himself valuing *The Wild Goose Chase* over *The*

*Maid's Tragedy* or *Philaster*, it is time for him to question his own assumptions.

The primary assumption behind Kirsch's theory about "providential" unity is the idea that a play cannot be good if its merits are "merely" theatrical; it must also present a morally coherent picture of the real world. Plays that present such pictures (Shakespeare's, Middleton's, Jonson's) receive Kirsch's approval, and are treated to some extremely penetrating critical discussion – indeed, the chapter on Middleton stands along with Richard Levin's essays in *The Multiple Plot* as the most illuminating criticism we have on that playwright. But when a play fails this arbitrary test, Kirsch subjects it to lamentably reductive analysis, and misses the valuable theatrical experiences that it does offer us; this is especially true of his chapters on Marston and Ford. Perhaps critics should simply stay away from works that they dislike.

One final note. Good as this book is at its best, it would be even better if Kirsch argued his points for what they are worth. This reviewer found many of his views quite tantalizing, and longed to be persuaded or given more solid evidence, but found only hints and guesses. As Martin Price wrote of Kirsch's earlier work (*Dryden's Heroic Drama*, 1965), "This book contains so much that is excellent one could only wish it more comprehensive." We should demand a sequel.

JOHN REIBETANZ, *University of Toronto*

---

Ruth H. Blackburn. *Biblical Drama Under The Tudors*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971. Pp. 208. \$11.

This critical survey discusses the "phases of development through which the Biblical drama passed," and its relationship to Reformation controversy (7), in terms of some twenty-two English, Latin, Greek and German play-texts from about 1525 to 1620, all written, acted or published in England. Blackburn argues that this drama, mainly Protestant in treatment, though often medieval in theme, exchanges its original New Testament, anti-Catholic subjects for Old Testament moral proof-texts in the Elizabethan period, and later declines altogether, possibly because of Puritan anti-theatre sentiment. Chapters treat John Bale's works, *Godly Queen Hester*, the humanist drama of Thomas Watson, Nicholas Grimald, John Christopherson and John Foxe, seven pre-Shakespearean plays including *Jacob and Esau*, Wager's *Marie Magdalene* and Garter's *Susanna*, and four late pieces, the Lodge-Greene *Looking Glass*, Peele's *David and Bethsaba*, and the *Esther* and *Prodigal Son* plays from the 1620 German anthology.

In itself this miscellany of diverse traditions, periods, languages and dramatic auspices lacks continuity, and the volume's non-definition of what constitutes a Tudor Biblical play confuses the subject still more. Though amplified, revised and acted well into Elizabeth's reign, the Corpus Christi cycles receive skimpy treatment, mainly in a background chapter that notes, for example, their "little attempt at local color or historical objectivity," "naïve literalism" and "peculiar charm of unaffected devotion" (17-18). The Digby *Conversion of St. Paul* and *Mary Magdalene* (limits ca. 1480-1520) are unaccountably neglected, though the latter's relationship to Grimald's and Wager's plays seems relevant here. Instead, the volume begins incongruously with Bale's *Three Laws*, a morality play without Biblical plot. Later, *King Darius*, two-thirds of which is moral allegory, is analysed, along with the very