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9-24-2021

**Review of "*The Origins of English Revenge Tragedy*. George Oppitz-Trotman. *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Renaissance Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. xiv + 258 pp. £80."**

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### Recommended Citation

Dressel, Samantha. "The Origins of English Revenge Tragedy. George Oppitz-Trotman. *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Renaissance Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. Xiv 258 Pp. £80." *Renaissance Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2021): 1067–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2021.193>

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**Comments**

This book review was originally published in *Renaissance Quarterly*, volume 74, issue 3, in 2021.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2021.193>

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The author

ways about problems too complex to be dealt with in the isolating, linear fashion with which human problems are usually met” (314).

*Spenserian Moments* teaches us how to read *The Faerie Queene* by opening ourselves to its strangeness, by allowing its improvisation to invite us into “the poet’s open enterprise of creative thought” (12), and by exulting in its beauty and intelligence. For me this is entirely satisfactory. Indeed, I find critical studies of *The Faerie Queene* somewhat disappointing, not because they lack insight, but because they rarely approach my sheer pleasure in reading Spenser’s poetry. That said, having spent a career immersed in Elizabethan poetics, politics, religion, and the writers Spenser read, including the English chroniclers, I am probably more open to the poem’s strangeness than I once was. What is compelling about *Spenserian Moments* is that it does not neglect a reader less familiar with Spenser’s world. Essays in the first part, “On Spenser,” remind readers about Spenser’s life, literature, and Irish experiences, and survey *The Faerie Queene*’s plan and publication history. This enables courteous readers to be open to the momentary and the momentous in Spenser’s poetics, which Teskey explores in “On Allegory” and “On Thinking” (parts 2 and 3). In part 4’s essays, “On Change,” Teskey reflects more personally on how time affects how we experience *The Faerie Queene*’s allegorical fixity and fluidity.

Rather than teaching what we should know about *The Faerie Queene*, *Spenserian Moments* offers ways to think about its bounty. Professor Teskey’s richly allusive writing, his command of literary theory and philosophy from Plato to Derrida, and his keen intellect and wit invite us to revisit Spenser’s brilliant poem with leisurely indulgence.

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doi:10.1017/rqx.2021.192

*The Origins of English Revenge Tragedy*. George Oppitz-Trotman.

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George Oppitz-Trotman begins his book *The Origins of English Revenge Tragedy* by highlighting one of the central tensions facing most critics of Renaissance drama: the temptation to treat characters as people, and the opposing impossibility of separating characters from the idea of their embodiment on stage. This tension is only heightened by the context of revenge tragedy, famous for its attention to memory and memorial. Characters within these plays question how they will be remembered after the close of the play’s events, demanding that the audience imagine their lives and afterlives. The arguments are deeply engaged with criticism of metatheater and the figuration of characters on the Renaissance stage. Oppitz-Trotman explores how the revenge context

heightens these phenomena that can be seen across the majority of the Renaissance canon.

The first chapter is a tour de force, investigating the historical context of the Knight Marshal's jurisdiction of the Verge within *The Spanish Tragedy*. Oppitz-Trotman realized that no other critic has paid substantial attention to Hieronimo's rank, one of historical yet waning importance in Kyd's England. He finds the Verge to be a shifting and temporal space directly linked to the presence of the monarch. This invisible circumstance heightens Hieronimo's urgency for revenge, necessitates its performance before the monarch, and draws attention to the similarly temporally—and spatially—bounded circumstance of the theater. The lost piece of nuance of Hieronimo's positionality is a profound contribution to revenge criticism. Chapter 2 brings into focus the importance of physical objects on the stage, in this case, the various sharp objects in *Hamlet*. Oppitz-Trotman focuses on the ways in which these objects always possess the capacity to stab, promising destruction through their sharp presences. The latter part of the chapter interrogates the concluding duel of the play, focusing on the way its extemporizing messiness adds a layer of reality to the duel and mimics improvisational acting.

Chapters 3 and 4 move from props and setting to Oppitz-Trotman's main focus of the embodied characters on the stage. First, he investigates the revenge canon's inheritance of the Vice figure in the form of the ghost. The result of this investigation is the realization of the theater's ambiguous presence in the moral landscape of early modern England. Chapter 4 continues the question of the actor's moral overlap with his character, linking the public service of acting to the servants of the revenge canon. In particular, Webster's Bosola highlights the problem of the contemporary servant: caught between an ancient model of hereditary, identity-based service and a more capitalistic model in which service works on pay, not substantively linked to the performer's identity. In chapter 5, Oppitz-Trotman ties together many earlier threads, negotiating the boundary between prop and person with *Duchess's* wax figures. He uses this oddly liminal figure as a jumping-off point to return to the question of memorialization, ghosts, and the tragic body on stage. In chapter 6, the book concludes that investigating the historical significance of words and details within the plays becomes increasingly important as we gain temporal distance from their embodied realities.

The book had a few places where attention to more plays might have benefited the argument; in a book concerned with revenge revenants, it was surprising not to find any treatment of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* with its heroine's body made a prop and her soul a ghost. Likewise, the focus on embodiment neglected the diversity of character bodies, not thinking about differences pertaining to gender or race, as in the Lady's female ghost, Carola's female service, or Aaron's Black reinterpretation of Vice. These additions would have added depth to the argument, as well as embedding the work in other current discourses in our field. Overall, though, this book is a fantastic contribution to the fields of both revenge drama and metatheatricality. It is grounded in

deep historicist understandings while firmly keeping a focus on literary and theatrical outcomes. The revelation of the Knight Marshal's control over the Verge is probably the most profound discovery, but the whole book sheds important new light on the connections between page and stage, imagination, and figuration.

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