

## Reviews

Swärdh, Anna. 2003. *Rape and Religion in English Renaissance Literature: A Topical Study of Four Texts by Shakespeare, Drayton, and Middleton*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 124. pp. 254.

Anna Swärdh's interesting and eminently readable book relates Shakespeare's only two works involving rape, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, to the possible rape of Anne Bellamy—who helped ensnare Robert Southwell—by Richard Topcliffe. Swärdh's other two texts are Drayton's *Matilda* and Middleton's *The Ghost of Lucrece*. It is an admittedly disparate selection but she argues that these texts are brought together because all four function on at least one or what she identifies as two levels of topicality: specific allusions to the Bellamy / Topcliffe affair (whatever its exact nature may have been) and general ones to religious upheavals and disagreements.

Swärdh begins with a vigorous and theoretically alert discussion of the nature of topical reading before going on to evaluate the notably different practices in this respect of David Bevington and Leah Marcus. She articulates her own aim as being to produce topical readings but still to pursue the possibility of transhistorical understanding (2003: 25), and she then moves on to discuss topical habits reading in the early modern period.

The opening chapter, 'Historical Background', offers overviews of the two levels of topicality proposed—the general background and the Topcliffe / Bellamy affair. The general section rehearses material which is already very well known, but the later material is not, and deserves to be. There follows a section on the authors' own affinities and influences. Swärdh is generally sensible here, marshalling such evidence as there is but making no attempt to push any of it further than it will go, although for my own taste the account of Shakespeare's Catholic connections offered on page 44 could do with a few more instances of words like 'probably'. There follows a section on Southwell and Topcliffe and a separate one on Bellamy, and finally a discussion of early modern ideas and definitions of rape.

The first analysis of a text centres on *Titus Andronicus*. This is the most detailed and substantial of Swärdh's discussions—the others become slimmer as they go along, partly because the argument is cumulative and incremental—and she reads Titus and what she terms his 'group' as Catholic and Saturninus and his allies and followers as Protestant. There are occasional awkwardnesses in the discussion—Swärdh does acknowledge the possibility of Peele's co-authorship of the play, but seems not really to know what to do with it—and the influence of Marlowe's Barabas on Shakespeare's Aaron is similarly noted merely in passing and apparently just for the sake of inclusiveness rather than because Swärdh is able in any way to tie it in with her argument. It seems a little bald to assert that 'Aaron shares several traits with Richard Topcliffe' (2003: 90), though she is, as she notes, not the first to make the suggestion. I am also unconvinced by the suggestion that 'Aaron's crime of fire can therefore be taken as an anti-catholic act' (94) because Catholics are so strongly associated with tears, nor did I understand why it was potentially significant that Southwell had been in prison for more than eighteen months (103). Swärdh is more plausible when she links the pit to Elizabethan Catholics' conditions of imprisonment and argues that Lavinia's rape may be like Anne Bellamy's, but the idea of general topicality works better than the attempt to find specific parallels, as when Swärdh links the play's emphasis on tears to the Counter-Reformation literature of tears, especially as practised by Southwell. She is at her most interesting when she suggests that *Titus Andronicus* may recapitulate the history of the Reformation, even if she cannot settle on which precise historical analogues are being proposed for which events in the play.

Next comes a discussion of *The Rape of Lucrece*, focusing primarily on the reference to Lucrece as a saint and developing an idea of Tarquin as simultaneously idolater and iconoclast. Again, the idea of general topical allusion is more convincing than the specific, where Swärdh suggests that Shakespeare's insistence on Lucrece's innocence can be seen as a possible defence of Anne Bellamy, and that Tarquin, like Aaron, can be read as a type of Topcliffe.

The fourth chapter treats both *Matilda*, which is read against Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond*, and *The Ghost of Lucrece*. It begins by surveying the complaint genre, and then goes on to argue that, contrary to received opinion, Drayton in *Matilda* is pro-Catholic, though

the conventional view of Middleton as opposed to Catholicism is correct, since he is satirising Counter-Reformation aesthetics in *The Ghost of Lucrece*. Swärdh suggests a direct influence from Southwell on *Matilda*, which she reads very much in terms of Catholic v Protestant, especially in the light of its fondness for tears and blood imagery. (In connection with this, Swärdh points to two mistakes in John Kerrigan's account of the poem.) However, the material supposedly connecting the poem to the Bellamy case is very slight.

Swärdh's book started life as her doctoral dissertation, and suffers from both the characteristic virtues and the characteristic weaknesses of a PhD thesis. Weaknesses include the perceived need to refer to critics whenever possible (and some of them are referred to in very odd ways: it took me a double-take to identify 'James Ronald Mulryne' as my own former teacher). On the plus side, it is very methodical and careful and fully engaged with and in control of its material. It is also generally very well written, though there are one or two rogue apostrophes, a recurrent use of 'Trentine' for 'Tridentine', and a repeated confusion between the Brutus who was the great-grandson of Aeneas and Lucius Junius Brutus, a quite different person. For the most part, however, the quality of the written English is highly commendable (and sadly far better than that achieved by many native speakers). Perhaps the only tiny solecism is the reference to Tarquin having to 'turn out the light' before he attacks Lucrece. It is also very thoroughly researched, though Stephanie Jed's *Chaste Thinking* seems an odd omission from the bibliography. In general, however, this is a book which, even if not always convincing in every detail, certainly deserves to be read.

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