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*The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to
Christopher Marlowe* by John Parker (review)

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The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe. By John Parker. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007. ISBN 9780801445194. Pp. xviii + 252. \$39.95.

As John Parker's subtitle indicates, his book aims to describe the transition from medieval Christian drama to its early modern counterpart. Since he is not the first to write this history, it seems appropriate briefly to place his version of events in the context of his predecessors. The first and most influential effort of this kind was E. K. Chambers's *The Mediaeval Stage* in two volumes (Oxford UP 1903), with an important two-volume successor in Karl Young's *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Clarendon, 1933). As O. B. Hardison pointed out in 1965 in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Johns Hopkins UP), Chambers and Young understood early English drama in evolutionary terms. Both critics assembled enormous amounts of compelling data, but they presented them in such a way as to support a preconceived idea of evolutionary development from "primitive forms" of popular, ecclesiastical, and local play-acting to the perfection of dramatic genius in Shakespeare. This idea, Hardison pointed out, is "assumed before the data are discovered and thus serves as an unconscious criterion for the selection" (9). Hardison has had some effect on recent histories of medieval drama, but Chambers's influence continues through the work of Robert Weimann in particular, who is still cited for his version of how medieval drama influenced its successor on the commercial London stage (*Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre*, Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). In general, macro-histories of medieval drama have given way most recently to micro-histories of material conditions surrounding early performance. As Pamela King noted in her review of *The Aesthetics of Antichrist*, John Parker shows "surprisingly little interest in the material conditions of the theatres of these plays" ("Out of the cycle," *TLS*, October 10, 2008, 26). The observation is accurate, but it misses the point: Parker is not writing a materialist history of playing conditions; he is writing a grand narrative of early drama—the kind of history that Chambers and Young originated.

The version of history that Parker aims to "modify" is not the evolutionary view, in which he has no express interest; rather, it is a "widespread view," in his words, that "there existed prior to the Reformation some form of Christianity free at its core from psychological, social, political, and economic determinations; that before undergoing secularization (to the extent that it did), Christian drama must have been purely spiritual—only later was it tarnished with ulterior motives" (ix). While I am flattered to have Parker attribute this "widespread view" to me in *The Devil and the Sacred in Early English Drama, 1450-1642*, (Cambridge UP, 2000) it is a view I recognize in nothing that has been published, by me or by anyone else—even Harold Bloom, to whom Parker also attributes this view (viii-ix). It is rather a rhetorical construction that Parker formulates in order to describe his way of

modifying it: "a pure spirituality does inhere in Christianity, but it is neither pure, nor spirit, because it is art" (x). Though Parker acknowledges Theodor Adorno for inspiring this insight (xn. 6), his real inspiration is Nietzsche—perhaps through Adorno but Nietzsche nonetheless, as in passing allusions to "Christian bad faith" (4), slave morality (24), the will to power (24, 29), and others too numerous to mention. Often, Nietzsche's influence is explicit: "Nietzsche's dream in *The Antichrist* of a modern *Schauspiel* to rival the extinct drama of Greece, which would feature 'Cesare Borgia as pope' and give occasion for 'immortal laughter' is already enacted ... in Marlowe" (190). More accurately, it is enacted precisely in Barnabe Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* (1606), which Parker seems not to know, but the real point is that for Parker early drama reached its perfection not in Shakespeare but in Marlowe.

To be sure, Parker's argument is not evolutionary, like that of Chambers and Young, so he avoids forcing the data into a preconceived developmental plan. Rather, for Parker, the possibility of Marlovian drama existed from the beginning in the claims of Christian theology itself: "It will be the task of this book to argue that Marlowe separates sacred and secular drama—the Middle Ages, as it were, from the High Renaissance—the way a common wall divides adjacent rooms. We debate whether the rooms are entirely separate or perfectly conjoined, but really this amounts to the same thing" (viii). All Marlowe did, in other words, was to make explicit what had been implicit in Christian thinking (and therefore in Christian drama) all along. Marlowe's antichristian drama merely manifests the implicit antichristianity of Christianity itself, which is a religion, Parker claims, that cannot exist without its opposite and therefore depends on it. Christ, for Parker, is Antichrist, and vice versa.

Parker supports this argument in five of the most erudite and closely argued chapters that have been published by a scholar of English literature for a long time. Fluent in Greek and German, he often translates his own texts, both primary and secondary, and corrects the translations of others, and his magnificent footnotes (to adapt his own admiring phrase for the scholarship of Elias Bickerman, the Old Testament scholar [31n. 68]) are extraordinary examples of compelling elaboration on points in the text. Every note repays attention to it, in the full detail of its fine type, at the foot of almost every page. (My only quarrel with the hefty apparatus is that the notes are not indexed—a serious omission, given their substantive relationship to the text.) Beginning with the New Testament documents and their way of interpreting the Hebrew Bible, Parker assembles a formidable array of authorities and detailed arguments in support of his central idea that from the beginning what Christians affirmed about Christ necessitated Antichrist, on whom Christ therefore depends and from whom he is, in effect, inseparable as a deceiver, miracle-worker, and vindictive claimant to divine authority. This is the burden of the first chapter, a very substantive introduction, though not counted as one of the numbered chapters. The next three chapters elaborate the argument

both thematically and historically. Chapter 1 explores the development of Christian typology and its impact on the English mystery plays (York in particular); chapter 2 relates the theology of redemption to economic analysis, detailing not only late Catholic theology and its impact on fifteenth-century morality plays but also Coverdale's translation of Luther's *Blutgeld* as "bludmoney" and its sanguinary transactions in Protestant thinking; chapter 3 takes on vicarious atonement; chapter 4 turns climactically to Marlowe and shows how his sardonic drama picks up the themes Parker has elaborated and embodies them in an exposé of Christian bad faith.

Such a bald summary cannot do justice to the thoroughness and detail of this remarkable book, but remarkable as it is in its formidable scholarship, it is subject to the same critique that Hardison offered of Chambers and Young: all the astounding erudition is assembled to support a preconceived idea, by which it stands or falls. In my estimation, despite my unabashed admiration for Parker's scholarship, mordant wit (which rivals Marlowe's and Nietzsche's), and encyclopedic knowledge, the erudition mostly falls, and it does so not because the data are false but because the argument they support is an example of what Daniel Dennett in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1995) calls "greedy reductionism," or a form of reasoning in which one thing is consistently identified as *nothing but* something else (80-83, 467-81). It is a favorite form of reasoning from the nineteenth century: romantic love is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will; generosity is nothing but calculating self-interest; morality is nothing but self-deception in the quest for power. In every case, the equation has much to commend it: Nietzsche mocked the vicious self-justification of social Darwinism in the name of Christianity, for example, as Dennett points out (461-67), and Paul Ricoeur describes "suspicion" in *Freud and Philosophy* as the characteristic stance of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, because blandly rationalistic explanations for every kind of depraved rapacity had become so commonplace (Yale UP, 1970, 31-36). The difficulty is not in the equation but in its implicit claim to exclusive and totalizing analysis: the wine everyone drinks is made of grapes. "History is catastrophic," Parker asserts (x), in contrast to the "widespread view" that Christianity at one time was "pure." In context, his statement comes very close to claiming that history is nothing but catastrophe, and such a reduction negates not only biblical salvation history but also Marx's claim that people make their own history—both in what they do and in how they interpret what they do. If history is catastrophic, then we can do nothing about catastrophe, and we might as well let it have its head, because it will proceed anyway.

The problem posed by Parker's greedy reductionism is apparent in his focus on Christopher Marlowe as his exemplary case study from early English drama. Is every view of the human situation in English Renaissance drama nothing but Marlowe's view? Most critics of Renaissance drama would prefer a more multi-vocal interpretation—Stephen Greenblatt among them. In an illuminating

comparison of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (the second clearly a response to the first), Greenblatt observes that Shakespeare "at once borrows from *The Jew of Malta* and repudiates its corrosive, merciless irony" (*Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Norton, 2004, 286). What Greenblatt finds in *Merchant* instead of Marlovian irony is what he calls "shoots of a strange, irrepressible imaginative generosity." Generosity may be nothing but economic self-interest, of course, but people have developed different words for thinking about it, including "grace," "faith," "hope," and "love," which have not been conceived as identical to each other and are not necessarily in every instance nothing but bad faith. If one begins with the assumption that all these things are a delusion, the evidence to support the assumption can certainly be found. Hypocrisy is certainly a reality, and so are self-deception, exploitation, and punitive cruelty in the name of God. Parker sets out to convince his readers that the Christian record and Christian reasoning show nothing but these things, and it would be foolish to deny the brilliance and erudition of his effort. All I can say is that this reader, for one, remains unconvinced of Parker's basic assumption.

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William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity. By Robert Rix. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007. ISBN 978-0-75465600-5. Pp. 182. \$99.95.

Anyone who has ever read or attempted to teach the poetry of William Blake will understand both the difficulty and the value of Robert Rix's project. Blake's work is difficult. Even work that seems simple is not so. Even the loveliest lyrics in *The Songs of Innocence*, the most absolutely straightforward, can make complex demands on a reader because they are parts of a larger, much less transparent whole. One is always being forced to consider the context of the speaker and the situation of those characters in the poem being spoken to or being spoken about. You also have the visual aspects of the works to consider.

Of course, *The Songs of Innocence* as a set of poems cannot be understood apart from, or out of context with *The Songs of Experience*, where similar questions of context are ever occurring. In the "Little Black Boy," from *The Songs of Experience*, the narrator is an African woman, a slave or former slave, attempting to explain to her child his relation to God and to the English boy who won't befriend him. How shall we appraise her perspective? Is she a guardian figure like those in *Innocence* who we mostly learn to trust, or is she more like those custodians of the poor in *Experience* we learn to despise? Does she teach the son to worship a debased, fallen image of God? Does she pass on to him a sort of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die religiosity, thus unintentionally serving the master, or does she proclaim the real thing revealed to her despite her and her son's master's worst intentions? Will the boy be consoled? Should he be? And how shall the reader respond?