Review Essay: Rowland Wymer, *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama*

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Such a position would be counter to Sidney’s argument in the *Defense of Poetry* and all that that implies—for example, a rejection of Aristotelian theory. Such a reading could lead to a reassessment of the poetic values of other Renaissance writers, a reconsideration of Renaissance poetic theory, beginning perhaps with Sidney.

Shore, argues, then, that through pastoral, Spenser rediscovers the only viable domain of poetry, to serve love and beauty, the intention he would say in *Epithalamion, Prothalamion*, and the *Four Hymnes*. In another sense, however, Shore suggests that Spenser takes from the poet the responsibility for moral and heroic action and places it where it really belongs, on the reader. This, if nothing else, is an important adjustment, and, therefore, a worthwhile contribution to the field.

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Rowland Wymer’s study is proof of what a dedicated but overly zealous scholar can accomplish: lengthen what should be a solid article into a short, repetitious book. Wymer’s contention that the sources for Renaissance doctrine on suicide and despair derive equally from traditional Christianity and from Roman Stoicism is indeed a feasible, though somewhat obvious, one. In fact, Wymer is at his best when he examines suicide and despair in one play; his discussion of *Hamlet* as bringing to life varying Renaissance views of suicide is compelling reading. However, when Wymer turns, for example, to “Lucrece Figures . . . who killed themselves to preserve their chastity” (96), his argument assumes the dimensions of a commonplace book. He lists plays at the rate of nearly one per paragraph, highlights the suicide scene, and concludes that each woman is a martyr because she chose suicide to defend her Stoical honor.

In perhaps the strongest chapter in the book, Wymer sees suicide as a form of repentance, or expiation, or defense of honor. Although Wymer again turns to snippets from obscure plays such as Heywood’s *The English Traveller* and Fletcher’s *Bonduca* to construct his case, his strongest proof comes with a thoroughgoing analysis of Othello’s death scene. Othello, Wymer argues, is a Faustus figure convinced of his own damnation; however, his suicide comes not out of despair, but from his Stoic stance as a Christian soldier. Wymer reinforces his argument by comparing the external naval battle of Turk versus Christian to Othello’s inner turmoil of heathen versus
soldier in the service of Catholic Venice. Honor as a war hero, coupled with knowledge of Desdemona's innocence, leads Othello to a Stoic and honorable suicide.

Mind-moving literary criticism occurs when a writer leads the reader along, such as Wymer does with his rich, five-page discourse on Othello. Readers are less apt to be convinced when Wymer, arguing that paradox is at the heart of Christian doctrine about despair, jams together in one paragraph references to Chaucer, Morality plays, Shakespeare, and Luther. Such widely scattered allusions, in terms of writers, genres, and time periods, leave the reader bewildered and sceptical. At this (and other) points in the book, one is tempted to pencil in marginalia requesting omission. Wymer can make his case for the paradox of Christian and Stoical doctrines in a few pages, not many. In short, when Wymer dwells upon a suicide, he argues well and writes well. When he constructs a pastiche of primary and secondary sources, his argument becomes clouded and his writing smells of the scholarly inkhorn.

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In 1927 Eleanore Boswell published for the Malone Society an edition of Edmund Ironside, an anonymous late sixteenth-century chronicle history play from Egerton 1994 in the British Library. In The Young Shakespeare: Studies in Documentary Evidence, Anglistica, II, 1954, E. B. Everitt attributed the play to Shakespeare and, still claiming Shakespeare as the author, published a modernized edition of Edmund Ironside in Six Early Plays Related to the Shakespeare Canon, Anglistica, XIV, 1965. Everitt's attribution received little credence, and it remained for the musicologist Eric Sams to reopen the case in 1982 in the pages of the Times Literary Supplement. Shakespeare's Lost Play "Edmund Ironside," a hybrid edition somewhere between Boswell's diplomatic edition and Everitt's modernization, was achieved, in Sams's words, by "depunctuating Everett and decapitalising Boswell" (53). It is Sam's conviction that "the Ironside case, now reinforced and returning to the charge, will... strike every rational and fair-minded reader as extremely strong" (1); that William Shakespeare wrote Edmund Ironside, in his own hand, the same hand that wrote Hand D in the manuscript of Sir Thomas More; and that Edmund Ironside was written and acted circa 1588.