Dieter Fuchs

Elizabethan Revenge Drama: Cultural Representations, Signifying Practices, and the Rise of Protestant Middle-Class Discourse

Rewritings of the Hamlet-Pattern of the Dispossessed Son

Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

Anglistik – Amerikanistik – Anglophonie

Band 28

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Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Fuchs, Dieter: Elizabethan Revenge Drama: Cultural Representations,
Signifying Practices, and the Rise of Protestant Middle-Class Discourse.
Rewritings of the Hamlet-Pattern of the Dispossessed Son /
Dieter Fuchs. -
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2022
(Anglistik – Amerikanistik – Anglophonie ; Bd. 28)
ISBN 978-3-86821-940-1

Umschlagabbildung: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres,
Gianciotto Discovers Paolo and Francesca (1819).

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier.

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2022
ISBN 978-3-86821-940-1

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
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Internet: http://www.wvttrier.de
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Acknowledgements

I hereby wish to express my gratitude to my academic teacher Hans Walter Gabler: the excellence of his guidance and advice as a scholar and friend cannot be expressed in words; to Ina and Tilo Schabert for their never-ending goodwill and encouragement; to my postdoctoral mentors Werner Huber and Ewald Mengel for offering important feedback at various stages of the book; to Anna Spanring and Mark Schreiber for proofreading, revising, and discussing central aspects of the study; to my wife, Birgit, for all her love, patience, and help. To my wonderful friends and colleagues Sylvia, Elke, Michela, Sandra, Tamara, and Paul, for everything.

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Note on the Texts, List of Plays in Chronological Order, Illustrations

Note on the Texts

The text editions used in this study are identified in the first section of the works cited list. As far as the textual variants of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are concerned, the study relies on the Second Quarto (Q2) as its standard source: if not stated otherwise, all the quotations and references will be based on Q2. References to the First Quarto (Q1) and the First Folio (F1) will be marked accordingly.

List of Plays in Chronological Order[*]

1567	John Pikeryng, *Horestes*
1587	Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*
1594	William Shakespeare & George Peele, *Titus Andronicus*
1600	John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge: The Second Part of Antonio and Mellida*
1601	William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
1603	The First Quarto (Q1): *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*
1604/5	The Second Quarto (Q2): *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*
1623	The First Folio (F1): *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*
1602	Henry Chettle, *The Tragedy of Hoffman or a Revenge for a Father* [= *Hoffman's Revenge*]

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[*] This chronology is mainly based on the Oxford World's Classics edition of Four Revenge Tragedies by Katharine Eisaman Maus ([1995] 2008a: xxxvi). The question if *Antonio's Revenge* was first produced before or after *Hamlet* is an enduring subject of scholarly debate, however.

Illustrations

Table 1: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Gianciotto Discovers Paolo and Francesca* (1819). Musée Turpin de Crissé.

Table 2: Jean Michel Moreau The Younger (†1814), Illustration from *The Sorrows of Werther*. Engraved by Pierre-Philippe Choffard. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

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Table 12: Annunciation (Virginal Conception): *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioune. A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis. A Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustrated from Der Spiegel der Menschlichen Behältnis.* Speyer: Drach, c. 1475. Ed. Avril Henry. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986. 66.

Table 13: Frontispiece of the 1615 Quarto of *The Spanish Tragedie: or, Hieronimo is mad againe.* London: W. White & T. Langley, 1615.

1. Introduction: Spectacles of Challenge – Challenged Spectacles

Wandering the inferno, the speaker of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1308-21, Inferno: Canto V) meets the ghosts of Francesca and Paolo da Rimini – a famous couple of ill-starred lovers. He is moved with pity when they tell him their story in an underworldly interview and mention that their reason for being sent to hell is unlawful lust stirred by a naughty book. Reading the lines of the Arthurian romance of Sir Launcelot – the Knight of the Round Table who committed adultery with the wife of his feudal Lord King Arthur – in each other's company, Francesca and Paolo's passions were fired by the artistic representation of unruly love. Thus, the book acquired a bawd-like function, and the act of reading stimulated acts of carnal love:

> One day we read to pass the time away,
> of Lancelot, how he had fallen in love;
> we were alone, innocent of suspicion.
>
> Time and again our eyes were brought together
> By the book we read; our faces flushed and paled.
> To the moment of one line alone we yielded:
>
> It was when we read about those longed-for lips
> Now being kissed by such a famous lover,
> That this one (who shall never leave my side)
>
> Then kissed my mouth, and trembled as he did.
> Our Galehot was that book and he who wrote it.
> That day we read no further. (Inferno V: 127-38)

When discovered by Francesca's husband and Paolo's older brother Gianciotto, the two lovers are killed in an act of revenge.

When Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres chose the epic story of Francesca and Paolo as the topic of a nineteenth-century painting (Table 1), he focused on the tale's dramatic potential. As can be seen on canvas, the illegitimate couple is presented in the performative act of falling in love when the husband is about to enter the stage-like room from behind an arras to vindicate his honour. Like the lover – who is about to penetrate the female body –, the patriarch is ready to strike through with his sword: he is lethally about to invade and reduce the bodies of his infidel wife and her beloved to corpses.

As it stimulates unruly sexual passion and carnal revenge, the adulterous story of Sir Launcelot may be considered a phallogocentric or even phallic text, which is about to enter the young woman's covetous body through the ear – a constellation, which ironically recalls the Holy Virgin Mary's chaste conception of Jesus Christ as a stock image in the field of Catholic iconography. As exemplified by Tables 3 and 4, the Biblical mystery of virginal conception constitutes a very popular subject in the field of Western pictorial art: whereas the Virgin Mary conceived Christ when God's spiritual word written down in the Bible (note the portrayal of the Holy Virgin as a reader of the open book) entered the chaste woman's immaculate ear in the dove-like shape of the

Holy Ghost, the seductive Launcelot story is about to enter Francesca's aural channel as well. Rather than turning God's chaste Biblical word into chastely begotten flesh, however, the seductive text of the worldly romance stirs the young woman's carnal appetite and thus results in unruly sexual intercourse as a sin of the human flesh.

In the Biblical case of virginal conception, the Archangel Gabriel verbally assists the Christian deity to father his only son with the help of the Holy Virgin. In the case of Dante's lovers, however, a young man challenges the God-like position of his clan's patriarch when he invades his older brother's wife's unruly body as a heinous overreacher. To stress this mock-Biblical correspondence, the painter of the Francesca and Paolo episode added a flower vase to his painting in order to allude to the traditional representation of the Biblical Annunciation to the Virgin in Western art: when she is about to conceive Christ through the word, the Virgin stands next to a lily vase or a lily held by the Archangel, which signifies virginity (cf. Tables 3-4; 9-11).

However, Dante's Francesca and Paolo story does not only ironically refer back to the Biblical episode of the Virginal conception of Jesus Christ. It also foreshadows a key episode from the most famous Elizabethan revenge tragedy. In ironic contrast to Dante's aged patriarch – who enters the room from behind an arras and takes revenge on his overreaching young brother –, Hamlet tries to take revenge on his overreaching uncle whom he supposes to hide behind an arras in his mother Gertrude's room: his uncle Claudius who has not only killed his older brother, King Hamlet Senior, to make love to the deposed patriarch's merry widow Gertrude; by usurping both his older brother's crown and wife, Claudius has also dispossessed his nephew, Hamlet Junior, of his late father's patrimony. Owing to the circumstance that the Hamlet-Pattern of the dispossessed son inverts both the Biblical Annunciation to the Virgin and Dante's Francesca and Paolo episode, one may assume that this constellation casts doubt on the traditional representation of patriarchal discourse.

As the present study considers the Elizabethan tradition of revenge drama – plays by Pikeryng, Kyd, Shakespeare, Marston, and Chettle – experimental rewritings of the Hamlet archetype of the dispossessed son, it is going to argue that these texts articulate a crisis of late-medieval feudal society and shed light on a proto-modern socio-cultural shift. To show that there is something rotten in the traditional patriarchal world, the Hamlet-Pattern features a son whose late father's bequest is usurped by a Satan-like caricature of the Biblical father deity.

But let us return to Dante's archetypal love and revenge story at this introductory stage. Functioning as the primal gateway to carnal lust, Francesca's over-receptive aural channel, positioned next to Paolo's whispering lips, may thus be compared to a vaginal orifice rather than the virginal Marian ear it alludes to at first sight. Although Dante's episode mentions the lovers' eyes rather than their ears, the seminal role of the aural channel must be stressed owing to Paolo and Francesca's collective reading practice. Rather than engaging in private textual research such as modern scholars in the notoriously silent and isolated institution of the library, Dante's lovers must have read out the text aloud and considered it a joyful means of interpersonal or (in the Bakhtinian [1975]

1996 sense of the word) dialogic communication (cf. Kittler 1994: 287): they must have engaged in a form of textual intercourse, whose seductive soundscape stimulates the ear to foster acts of sexual intercourse, or vaginal rather than aural penetration.

The sexual or corporeal dimension of this sort of textual intercourse is emphasized by the pictorial representation of Francesca's opened booklet. In satirical allusion to the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin as a reader of God's chaste word written down in the Bible, the mock-Marian Francesca drops the seductive book – whose pages are impregnated with the Arthurian romance of Launcelot's worldly love via the inky ejaculation of its writer's quill – when she is about to yield to her lover's phallic power. As David Lodge puts it in his post-modern rewriting of the Arthurian legend in *Small World*, Ingres' painting of Paolo and Francesca presents the married woman's willingness to let the adulterous lover part "her thighs like the leaves of a book" (1984: 325): seduced by the indecent text of the Launcelot story written down on the labial pages of the booklet she holds in her hand, Francesca is ready to receive the carnal imprint of Paolo's sexual lust. The erect handle of the sword positioned in between the young man's legs stresses this phallic symbolism, whereas Francesca's husband Gianciotto enters the scene from behind the curtain as a revenger in order to penetrate the adulterous couple's bodies with a sword proper. Following the Old Testamentarian Talionic principle of strictly equitable 'eye for eye' justice, the patriarch's vindictive bodily penetration corresponds exactly with his younger brother's sexual penetration of the unfaithful woman's body. One deed must outdo the other.

The story of Francesca and Paolo da Rimini thus represents the topic of worldly love and revenge in a feudal context: the human body has a mainly public and physical function and is inscribed with social meaning by being penetrated with iconic signifiers of patriarchal authority. Its physis is penetrated with the authority of the feudal Lord and vindicated by the phallo(go)centric triad of the male sexual organ, the sword, and blood. Like other bodily liquids, blood is tied to the disciplined or penetrated human body as the main site of feudal cultural representation.

At a later stage – when the feudal iconic and the scriptural symbolic code overlap in the early modern period as a time of semiotic transition –, blood becomes a substitute for ink to inscribe the skin as a substitute for paper with the dagger as a substitute for the writer's quill.

The story of the conception of Christ by the Holy Virgin Mary, in contrast, represents the topic of divine love in the context of Biblical book culture, which de-centres the covetous human body and focuses on the eternal truth of God's spiritual word laid down in the Scriptures: as a meditative private reader, the Holy Virgin deciphers the divine plan prophetically foreshadowed in the Biblical 'book of the world', and realizes that God's chaste word is about to be made flesh when she meets the Angelic messenger. As we shall see, this concept of textual intercourse as a substitute for, rather than feudal foreplay of, sexual intercourse becomes the chief cultural paradigm of writing and reading in the eighteenth century. It is inextricably connected with the hermeneutic cult of the Biblical text cherished by post-reformatory Protestant discourse, the rise of bourgeois middle-class culture and the emerging literary genre of the novel.[1]

Like Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Goethe's epistolary *Sturm und Drang* novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) may be considered an important foundational text of the rise of bourgeois middle-class culture triggered off by meditative Biblical book culture represented by the divine power and symbolism of the word. As Kittler (1994) has shown, Goethe's epistolary novel functions as an excellent source text for the comparison of feudal bodily and bourgeois textual cultural representation, owing to the fact that it consciously rewrites Dante's love story of Francesca and Paolo from an eighteenth-century middle-class point of view. As visualized by the pictorial illustration of Goethe's rewriting of Dante – the falling in love of Werther and Lotte composed by Jean-Michel Moreau the Younger (Table 2) –, the cultural representation of these two scenes could not be more different.

If we compare Moreau's etching of Lotte and Werther with Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' painting of Dante's Paolo and Francesca (Table 1), this difference may be attributed to the cultural substitution of the chief signifier of feudal bodily penetration by the interiority of the bourgeois soul medi(t)ated by Biblical book culture. Thus, the sentimental depiction of Werther and Lotte's love inverts the constellation of Francesca and Paolo da Rimini: whereas the medieval woman deviates from the intertextual norm of the Virginal conception of Christ (see Tables 3-4) as an Eve-like fallen sinner of the flesh, her eighteenth-century counterpart functions as a worthy counterpart of the Holy Virgin Mary. Like the Holy Virgin depicted by Simone Martini (Table 4) – who is willing to receive the immaculate word of the father deity written down in the Bible, but determined to resist any lustful stimulation of her aural channel –, Lotte, her novelistic counterpart, averts her ear in order not to let the seductive text of Werther's unruly Paolo-like passion enter her chaste body (see Table 2).

In the story of Francesca and Paolo, the worldly book – whose sinful text enters the young woman's greedy ear to incite lusty carnal bodily penetration – functions as an anti-Biblical bawd to unruly love. In the case of Lotte and Werther, however, the Holy

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[1] As elucidated by Attila Kiss (2018 & 2011: 31), this representational change from secular feudal iconicity to the symbolism of Protestant middle-class book culture via courtly aristocratic indexicality must not be confused with the Medieval tradition of Clerical or Monastic scriptural discourse practiced by initiated men of the Catholic Church rather than laypeople: "In medieval high semioticity the elements of reality as icons in the textuality of the world are in a motivated, direct relationship with universals and with the generating figure of the Absolute, or Christ, who is the pure manifestation of the union of Flesh and Spirit, signifier and signified. […] This philosophy (which will be attacked later by nominalism and reformed theology) offers the task of becoming God as the only step out of this textuality, the Book of Life. Thus, medieval drama aims at transparency; it does not impose an interpretive task on the audience; it reports and presents rather than imitates. Yet this transparency is illusionistic since religious drama always copes with a 'representational insufficiency', for Christ can never totally be present, the restoration of the unity between flesh and spirit can never really be achieved on the stage."