Review Article

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Renaissance Inwardness and Current Critical Practice

Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance. By Katharine Eisaman Maus. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 222 pages. $37.50 US.

THE REASSERTION OF the importance of 'inwardness' and interiority in the Renaissance, in the face of the materialist emphasis on socially constructed subjects, is perhaps best exemplified by Katharine Eisaman Maus's recent book. As she points out in her introduction, it is not possible to dismiss Hamlet's famous reference to "that within which passes show" (1.2.85) as an anachronistic or premature manifestation of bourgeois subjectivity,[1] since Hamlet "deals eloquently but almost truistically in matters that would have been commonplace for his original audience" (2–3). Maus recognizes that since "the idea of 'inward truth' in early modern England is intimately linked to transcendental religious claims, antagonism to those claims perhaps contributes to the recent tendency to underestimate the conceptual importance of personal inwardness in this period" (27). Yet she also admits she shares the "religious incredulity" of many recent scholars, and proceeds to universalize our postmodern attraction to the "notion that selves are void" (28). I wish to argue that, whether or not we as scholars

[1]Francis Barker's argument in *The Tremulous Private Body* (New York: Methuen, 1984) 31, 58.

share this "religious incredulity," Maus's historicized readings of "inwardness" seem ultimately limited by the homologies she adopts. In her discussions of various dramatic texts, the critical conclusions frequently invite clarification and expansion in psychoanalytic terms, in particular the terms of pre-Oedipal development and pathology. While for Maus the "developmental concerns" of psychoanalysis came to seem unrelated to her primarily "epistemological" agenda, I contend that the complexity of self-fashioning makes this distinction or methodological separation questionable. In fact, recent psychoanalytic theory, particularly object-relations theory and theories of narcissism, can be applied to Renaissance texts with historical sensitivity.

I must admit, however, to a certain trepidation arising from this proposal either to criticize or validate particular theoretical methodologies, because of unresolved, and what I have finally come to perceive as unresolvable, ideological disagreements that plague current critical practice. Near the end of her introduction, Maus comments: "The nature of my topic, because it requires collusion in the structures I am investigating, exacerbates the hermeneutically circular difficulties inherent in any process of interpretation" (33). The final phrase, "inherent in any process of interpretation," already intimates the universal nature of this critical dilemma, but the exacerbation Maus mentions invites us to consider the particularly vexed nature of philosophies of subjectivity. To the above statement Maus adds, "Inwardness, inaccessibility, invisibility, all seem to lose their authenticity as soon as they are advertised to or noted by another. The student of inwardness—playwright, inquisitor, or critic—annihilates the [observed] material, like a physicist who explodes subatomic particles in order to reveal the structure they supposedly used to possess" (33). Versions of this dilemma recur throughout the study; we might call it 'the vanishing point of essence,' the quandary that human consciousness can analyse anything but the nature of the consciousness doing the analysing; the eye, or indeed the 'I,' cannot look at itself. Maus certainly has not discovered this problem, for it is inherent in many of the theoretical controversies of the past few decades. But I can't help taking it in a direction that Maus does not, and probably would not, approve of. What I consider the ineradicable presence of the metaphysics of presence inevitably raises

questions of 'faith,' if not dogmatic theological ones, then unavoidable assumptions about human ontology that cannot be proven or theorized. Examples of such faith might include necessary transpersonal or inter-personal assumptions about intent and commitment which, although immaterial, seem impossible to live without, legally or morally. Maus observes in her examination of Renaissance culture that the "Christian God exemplifies not only mysterious inwardness, but an effortless transcendence of the boundaries that frustrate human knowledge" (10). Human experience, however, is delimited by the difference between divine and human observation, so that "the inwardness of persons is constituted by the *disparity* between what a limited, fallible human observer can see and what is available to the hypostasized divine observer" (11). These very observations, however, suggest there is more to the Renaissance recourse to metaphysics than what materialist critics characterize as "glaring mystifications of social and political dynamics" (27). Inescapable and practical social and legal concerns are in fact involved; for example, Maus recognizes that it "was because hypocrisy was so easy [in Renaissance society] that it was so dangerous" (24). Yet who has not, at any point in history, experienced the danger of hypocrisy, by very definition the unethical discrepancy between outward and inward, signifier and signified? It is my unfashionable observation that the *denial* of any recourse to metaphysics can itself lead to glaring mystifications of social and political dynamics. In fact, rigid theoretical demands can support ethically questionable or narrowly self-interested political agendas, as when discussions that dare to make assumptions about interior will, choice or moral character are refused public hearing on the basis that their so-called 'essentialist' positions are 'insufficiently theorized.'

Maus perceives a "paranoia about hypocrisy and surveillance" (36) in Renaissance texts. Why, she asks, must the distinction between interior and exterior be "endlessly reiterated" (14)? The answer might be that historically the period involved a radical redefinition of subjectivity in a major paradigm shift that in many ways resembles our own. But Maus I think misinterprets or at least oversimplifies the connection between the morality of inwardness and religious belief. She asserts that "for Renaissance Christians, virtue is the effect of a carefully cultivated paranoia" and "requires

God's surveillance in order to exist, as the falling tree needs to be overheard in order to make a sound" (38). This rationale precludes the possibility that virtue might intuitively require simply the recognition of an Other, not necessarily an omniscient deity; although admittedly most people in the Renaissance presumably considered the self as metaphysically derived, I doubt that their moral sense was as primitive as Maus suggests. Maus attempts to radically separate religious and social concerns when she argues that the subjectivity of inwardness and the subjectivity of social relationships are imagined as "mutually antagonistic" (43) in the period, yet even some of the highly selective evidence she quotes, such as a passage from Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, suggests the opposite, that one's spiritual identity and one's social relations could in fact be mutually reinforcing and cooperatively defined. Maus, had she chosen, could have drawn some support from Debora Shuger's study, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, where a distinction is drawn between a performative, social self and an inner, spiritual or (what Shuger terms) pneumatic self. As Shuger argues, the inner "selfhood that interests Andrewes and Hooker is not the source of ethical judgment (that is conscience) but of emotional response, for the hidden, private self is experienced as desire."[2] Thus within the pneumatic self's field of concern there is little emphasis on morality. While I am somewhat reluctant to challenge Shuger's extensive and impressive erudition, I wonder whether the bias of genre in her study—her exploration of religious lyrics, sermons and discourse, and her exclusion of the drama—results again in too neat a distinction between inward and social subjectivity. In reading Maus's *Inwardness and Theater* the question certainly arises whether the period's concern with hypocrisy must be considered "paranoid," or rather should be regarded as an understandable response arising out of the gradual and anxiety-ridden shift from a predominantly religious to a predominantly secular society. With intensified individualism and humanism, the concern for personal integrity and dependability becomes more acute; thus Maus's observation regarding, for example, *Richard III*, that "malevolent hy-

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[2]*Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 99.

pocrisy is not merely an attribute of the tyrant, but virtually the definition of tyranny" (50), should perhaps not come as a surprise.

It is through a sensitivity to the transitional aspect of the early modern historical context that I believe psychoanalysis has a meaningful role to play in our interpretation of Renaissance texts. The strictly religious Renaissance debate about ontological status quickly reaches a moral dead end, as Maus observes: "when the true interior is conceptually separated from the visible exterior, problems of evaluating the truth of any claim about the interior immediately arise. The religious controversialists endlessly accuse their enemies of fraudulence, but the ascription can never be proven, and is always susceptible to reversal" (50). We are left, as in *Hamlet*, having to "by indirections find directions out." It is in the analysis of the relation between characters that we are led to comprehend the nature of human interiority, and it is here that psychoanalytic methodology can prove useful. Meredith Skura provides a helpful summary of the relevant psychoanalytic approach: "Whereas Freud says that the ego is a bodily ego, the object-relations analysts say it is a relational ego, defined by how it acts toward and feels about other people .... While Freud focuses on the oedipal conflict between a well-defined self and the world of the father and sees castration as the primary threat to integrity, the object-relations analysts study the origins of the self in relation to ... [the] preoedipal unity with [the mother] .... The danger, according to object-relations theory, is not castration but rather a failure of the self to cohere in the first place."[3] Maus's description of Richard III's ontological dilemma in fact sounds very like the narcissistic dilemma described by object-relations theory, which is characterized by a vacillation between fantasies of complete self-sufficiency, and an abject dependency on others.[4] Maus states of Richard: "The more he struggles to constitute an inwardness by excluding alternative, 'relational' modes of determining identity, the more he finds himself unwillingly entangled in a relational mode." She generalizes

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[3]"Psychoanalytic Criticism," *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992) 352–53.

[4]See Stephen Frosh, *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1991) chap. 3, "Narcissism."

the observation to the theatrical-historical moment: "The Renaissance theater presents, again and again, both the incommensurability of these two methods of self-definition and the impossibility of separating them" (53). It is tempting to universalize this as a human dilemma we are in a sense still experiencing, or perhaps experiencing again in the late twentieth century, in our own struggles for self-definition in a culture whose organization of power and authority have become more loosely defined. Richard, in spite of his evil hypocrisy, is far more real to us than that cypher of providence, Richmond, whom Richard in the final act rightly calls "shallow" (5.3.220). Richmond's final triumph in *Richard III* is a false resolution psychologically; while it might be cited as more evidence that inward and social subjectivities are mutually antagonistic, the character of Richmond lacks inwardness of any kind, and is in many ways a political solution whose roots lie in Tudor propaganda.

Maus's attempts to maintain a radical separation between the subjectivity of inwardness and the subjectivity of social relationships seem questionable as well in her discussion of *The Spanish Tragedy*, where she concludes: "The denouement of *[The] Spanish Tragedy* suggests that for Kyd, the connection between a challenge to authority and a highly developed sense of personal inwardness is not accidental but absolutely intrinsic. Recognizing what one does not share with one's superiors—the significance of experiences that are irreducibly one's own—upsets the deference to others' interests that is the essence of subordination" (70). The latter part of this assertion is curious in light of Maus's earlier observation that "Hieronimo's apparently unexceptional demand for 'justice' seems a product of his particular social positioning, a professional advocate's idealization of a law that promises to compensate individuals on the basis of behaviour rather than on the basis of rank" (63). Here Maus carefully discovers a reason for Hieronimo's "apparently unexceptional demand for 'justice'" in his social conditioning; but having attempted to deny that justice is something human individuals in society essentially yearn for, Maus still fails to explain why Hieronimo inwardly has this ideal expectation long before he challenges authority at the end of the play. Maus rightly stresses class considerations in Kyd's play, to which recent criticism has devoted more attention, but she misreads Hieronimo's

motivations. It is not his recognition of what he does not share with his superiors—the significance of experiences that are irreducibly his own—that upsets his deference to others' interests, but his outrage at not finding a universal operation or applicability of social justice in spite of his class difference, which he would otherwise be perfectly happy to accept. His response to the servant and suborned murderer Pedringano reveals the metaphysical basis of his worldview: "I have not seen a wretch so impudent! / O monstrous times, where murder's set so light, / And where the soul, that should be shrin'd in heaven, / Solely delights in interdicted things" (3.6.89–92). In his madness he is torn between the deference of Christian morality—"*Vindicta mihi!* [Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord]" (3.13.1)—and the assertiveness of Senecan revenge: "The safe way for crime is always through crime" (translation of the Latin at 3.13.6). The furious conclusion of *The Spanish Tragedy* collapses all social distinctions in its fantasy of endless revenge, not because Hieronimo or others have come finally to assert their inwardness but because the essential value or sanctity of such inwardness was not recognized in the beginning; the final vision of hell is thus an image of narcissistic rage arising from an unjust society's failure to foster the integrity and guarantee the rights of its various citizens.

In her treatment of Marlowe, Maus focuses on the "relationship between coercion and language" (74) but her concern for Renaissance inquisitorial methods limits the significance of religious ideas within Marlowe's art and personality. The homology that Maus draws between heresy trials and Marlowe's plays is tenuous: for example, she asserts, "The inquiry into heretical opinions ... involves a series of examinations structured as a progression of more and more aggressive attempts to elicit compliance, like Tamburlaine's succession of increasingly ominous flags—white, red, and black—posted outside a city he intends to seize" (77). Such a reading needs a more careful establishment of Tamburlaine as a metaphoric figure for the inquisitor. Nevertheless, unsubstantiated, the analogy continues; Maus states that, after hearing the Virgins outside Damascus plead for the lives of the citizens, Tamburlaine "cannot mistake the frail, dignified elders or the hopeful young lords for himself—cannot even recognize a similarity between himself and the bridegrooms of Damascus. In his world, an ability to

enter imaginatively into the experiences of others is inextricable from the experience of being coerced or imagining oneself coerced" (94). The connection with heresy trials seems by this point gratuitous. While the subtle historicizing falters, Tamburlaine's narcissism, his inability "to enter imaginatively into the experiences of others," invites a psychoanalytic reading with a basis not in the limited context of Renaissance heresy trials but in male sexual identity and anxiety, which could be related both generally to early modern concerns or more specifically to Marlowe's. But Maus has no time for a Marlowe concerned with viable and fragile selves, and she breezily dismisses readings even obliquely concerned with romantic authenticity: "Harry Levin's Marlowe is a talented overreacher fighting a doomed battle against human limitation; Stephen Greenblatt's an ineffective saboteur fighting a doomed battle against the overwhelming forces of Renaissance cultural discipline. Both battles seem always already lost, owing to the immense disproportion between tiny Marlowe on one side and the rest of the world solidly unified against him on the other" (102). For Maus, cultural differences "probably made Marlowe's own situation seem considerably less desperate to him than it does in long retrospect, to critics fixated, as Marlowe of course could not be, upon his violent and untimely end" (102). Yet this surprising bit of psychologizing seems incompatible with the highly anxious, violent, and unstable milieu of Marlovian drama, which is characterized by anything but complacent, postmodern detachment.

Maus is more compelling in her treatment of Shakespeare and Jonson, and her discussion of *Othello* is the most intriguing of all, although this reading as well invites psychoanalytic clarification and expansion. The homology here involves a comparison of the drama to English jury trials: "English witchcraft and treason trials ... frame themselves as rituals of discovery that attempt to perform the highly desirable but technically impossible feat of rendering publicly available a truth conceived of as initially—and perhaps inescapably—inward, secret, and invisible to mortal sight. In a sense such a trial may serve as a paradigm of all social relations that seem to rely upon a more or less highly developed capacity for accurate surmise" (118). However, the human capacity in question leads to an interesting contradiction, since legal trials exploit "abilities that are supposed to be widely dispersed among the popu-

lace," yet "these 'easy,' normal, everyday skills are almost impossible to codify" (118), suggesting again that so much of human reading and human interaction escapes theoretical codification or description. Nevertheless the dilemma is very interestingly applied to *Othello*. Maus argues that what Othello "supposes he is pursuing is the kind of insight he attributes to his mother's friend, the Egyptian charmer who 'could almost read / The thoughts of people'.... But what he actually relies upon is circumstancial evidence ... Desdemona's 'token,' a handkerchief misleadingly mislaid. Either Othello must accept a degree of uncertainty in his relation to Desdemona, or he must repress his awareness of his own limitations as an observer" (120). But accepting "a degree of uncertainty" in relation to another might be called having faith, and Othello's demand for magical knowledge again reveals a narcissistic compulsion. There have of course been numerous psychological and psychoanalytic readings of *Othello*, and I cannot pretend to do justice to all of them here, but I believe Maus's reading in one way (unintentionally) adds to our psychoanalytic understanding of the play. For example, instead of seeing Othello and Desdemona as representatives of male and female sexual dynamics and of the difference between the male and female sexual imagination, as Janet Adelman does,[5] Maus considers more carefully the social context of the two protagonists. I would augment her reading by asserting that the instability of self of both Othello and Desdemona is encouraged by the social oppression Maus observes, which sows the seeds of their tragic, narcissistic dependency on each other. Othello's hypermasculine role as a kind of glorified killing machine is encouraged by the Venetian state that employs his martial talents. Maus observes that Othello "realizes [and confesses] himself in a narrative mode" (123), but his "energetic guilelessness is perhaps compensatory, involving as it does a denial or avoidance of potential discrepancies between surface and interior" (121); that is, he is prevented from discovering or understanding his own inwardness. And Desdemona's initial attraction to Othello, so incomprehensible to her father, is an understandably narcissistic and voyeuristic one. Prevented through patriarchal constraints from being

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[5] *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 63–75.

the hero of her own life, she cannot resist "with greedy ear / Devour[ing]" (1.3.148–49) the discourse of Othello's adventures. When we are told that "she wished / That heaven had made her such a man" (1.3.161–2) we cannot be sure whether she wants to possess or rather *be* Othello. Their tragic combination thus is facilitated by the social forces which inhibit their own self-integration. Maus's conclusion, however, seems thinner than the implications raised by her own reading. "By insisting that the truth always exceeds public methods of representation," she states, "*Othello* implies that the theater is as problematic as the jury trial, or as social life itself" (127). But in that one term "problematic" lies a whole host of moral, ethical, and practical questions which speak to the real meaning of the play, that is, why readers over the centuries have taken an intense interest in it.

There is no question that *Othello* encourages a kind of theatrical pleasure which is disturbingly voyeuristic, and further critical attention to the mechanisms of voyeurism in Renaissance literature is needed; it is surely not possible to appreciate the effect of *Othello*, or Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, or Spenser's *Bower of Bliss*, or Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* without some consideration of their voyeuristic appeal. In this sense Maus's engagement with other forms of public representation is helpful, and points the way to fruitful investigations in the future. Nevertheless, it is when Maus abandons her homologies and concentrates on inwardness *per se* that her observations are the most profound and satisfying. For example, she observes of Jonson's best-known work: "[Volpone] cannot help but attempt to dazzle a real or imagined onlooker: Mosca, Celia, 'the great Valois,' even when bidding for their admiration works against his own best interests. His theatrical gifts are rooted as much in a love of self-display as in a penchant for deception, and thus his very triumphs bear the seeds of his eventual downfall" (144). The discussion of Jonson gathers strength no doubt from Maus's earlier work on this figure, although the treatment of manliness perhaps could be clarified. Jonson, Maus claims, toys "with the possibility that virility is a facade and with the corresponding possibility that femininity is merely a matter of *appliqué*" but "cannot quite accept the morally corrosive implications of the radical conception that there is nothing 'real' underneath, no *substance* to the illusions of masculine or feminine identity" (152). These com-

ments lead to a comparison with Judith Butler's theories of the theatrical production of gender identity. Yet the "morally corrosive implications" behind Jonson's obsession with manliness deserve more careful analysis than Maus is willing to give them, for Jonson I think is fascinated with "the possibility of a life of cloistered self-indulgence" not primarily as a way "to opt out of the activities of a community altogether" (144) but as a symptom of the narcissistic failure of the assertion of manly and social responsibility.

A certain thinness or superficiality is evident again in the conclusion of Maus's book as a whole. In her final sentences Maus seems to opt for transhistorical significance: "The particular cultural forms in which early modern England grapples with problems of personal inwardness ... seem archaic in the late twentieth century. But we regard issues which underlie those ancient forms as quaint at our peril, and only by forgetting the strangeness of the culture we ourselves inhabit" (215). But the contemporary parallels Maus raises here seem to me the most ephemeral and least noteworthy aspects of our contemporary culture: the "titillating" exposure of private vice in the Michael Jackson and Woody Allen cases, or the "close relationship between accusations of sexual misconduct and the celebrity industry" as featured "on the cover of *People* magazine" (214). Part of the problem may be that Maus, as she admits, "shrinks from unreflectively equating what personal inwardness might mean in the early modern period ... with what it might mean today" (212). No one should be ready to do so "unreflectively," but I endorse Lyndal Roper's assertion that "it does not endanger the status of the historical to concede that there are aspects of human nature which are enduring";[6] in fact, I will go so far as to suggest that in carefully conceding universality we produce rich readings of texts more often than clichés, so that it is perhaps time to overcome the embarrassment at universalizing. Object-relations psychoanalysis offers a useful critical tool, since it avoids the biological phallocentrism of the classical Freudian reading of the Oedipus complex, while on the other hand it avoids the Lacanian disembodiment through "equating the symbolic not with inter-subjective relations in general but with language in particular" and

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[6] *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994) 13.

insisting that the developmental process is a shibboleth since "any protoself is annihilated by the Other" (Skura 355, 354). Object relations allows us to come to terms with bodies and moral choices about bodies—which do in fact exist beyond our discursive conceptions of them—while at the same time remaining sensitive to various idealizing strategies available at different historical moments; it thus holds attraction to those scholars of earlier periods who resist, as I do, the "notion that selves are [completely] void."