Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

R.S. White. *Innocent Victims: Poetic Justice in Shakespearean Tragedy*. 2nd ed. London: The Athlone Press, 1988. Pp. x, 149. \$32.50

When R.S. White begins one of his final sentences with the urgent plea that "The tired impasse into which contemporary Shakespearean criticism has been led by its constant insistence upon the old questions (Hamlet's 'madness,' Lear's 'resurrection,' Othello's 'jealousy,' and so on) should be rejected in favour of a fresher, more relevant approach" (p. 132), we might momentarily imagine ourselves within earshot of a New Historicist or otherwise postmodern Voice in the (supposed) Wilderness. If so, the remainder of the sentence, which expresses a longing for "immediate, human touchstones for evaluating and understanding the plays" (*ibid.*), quickly jolts us back into the real world of White's thinking – a world whose assumptions are radically, unabashedly, and above all *innocently*, those of liberal humanism. This is merely the last of many similar dislocations to which a reader is liable to be subjected if he or she sets this work, as its author does not, against the full background of the current critical scene.

In its own way, White's campaign is as political, as passionate, as subversive, as those of many postmodernists. Like them, he refuses to see texts as detached from social and moral contexts. His antagonists overlap with theirs – Leavis, Eliot – as do his concerns: the marginalized, the silenced, women. White even cites Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (1983) and a collection of feminist essays (*The Woman's Part*, ed. C. R. S. Lenz *et al.* [1980]) as indications that criticism is moving in his direction (p. 140). But what contrasting perceptions of the struggle! The postmodernist typically places the humanist concept of the individual at the very heart of the oppressive ideologies that need deconstructing. White, on the other hand, quixotically donning the whole armour of liberal-humanist hero, aims to cut through a tangled skein of modern approaches judged to be insufficiently liberal and humanistic: oblivious of *le non du père*, he hacks away at a Gordian Knot at least partly of his own tying.

White's moral position is solid and simple: he deplores suffering, especially when it is undeserved. For him, Lavinia, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia occupy,

through their emotional impact on the audience, the tragic centres of their respective plays. Thus he finds it, not merely misguided, but culpably unjust, that a preoccupation with the trials of the "great man" has tended to marginalize such characters – sometimes by impugning their innocence and so "demeaning" (p. 120) their roles. If we find this attitude more convincing as a response to life than to literature, White is unwilling to grant us this distinction. Rejecting New Critical notions of textual self-sufficiency, as well as what he sees as a modern "realism" based on nineteenth-century capitalist doctrines and sanctioning survival of the fittest characters, he reverts to earlier assumptions about the morally educative function of art. Shakespeare set out to teach the difference between right and wrong, and innocent victims are the key to his strategy.

Not that this strategy is always effective. Apart from the pernicious obfuscations of critics, Shakespeare himself is sometimes at fault (for instance in *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *King John*) for "not sufficiently stressing innocence, allowing evil too great a power over our minds to be counteracted" (p. 96). In such cases, our moral faculties need to be kept at a higher pitch of sensitivity: "We should be on our guard against being deceived and decoyed by the skilled rhetoric of the people of 'force' in plays, for to succumb would be to deny the moral design in which the existence of innocent victims is of crucial importance" (p. 45). The circularity of the argument is here painfully evident – exactly whose "design" are we thus duty-bound to support? So is the dependence on a transhistorical audience, spanning Shakespeare's time and ours, for whom White's own values are universal common sense down to their twentieth-century toes: the proxy fighting of "superpowers" (p. 53) is anticipated in *King John*, where the King also reveals "true indifference to the sanctity of individual human life" (p. 60); *Titus Andronicus* displays "the humanist [*sic*] attitude towards hunting as a brutal activity" (p. 30). Even White's only real excursion into Renaissance ideology, when he considers Original Sin (pp. 130–31), trails off into a highly subjective revision of the doctrine – largely based, it seems, on modern theologians – in order to accommodate his own idea of "innocence."

What gives most concern is not anachronism *per se*, but rather the fluency with which the author speaks his single language as he ranges in and out of literature and over the centuries, holding one-sided conversations not only with Shakespeare but with Dr. Johnson, Keats, Shelley, D. H. Lawrence, and Dylan Thomas, as if all were gathered for an evening of issues-discussion over date-squares and herbal tea. Certainly, he is on safe ground in claiming that "throughout history there have been some people able to see and analyze the injustices and hypocrisies of their own societies" (p. 24). New Historicism itself assumes the existence of some moral common ground. Nor is it yet impossible to discuss characters in traditional mimetic terms, despite recent claims (for example by Catherine Belsey in *The Subject of Tragedy* [1985]) that the very concept of the "self" is a post-Renaissance fabrication. But White owes both his readers and his own argument far more rigorous attention to boundaries and distinctions. People need not be "subjects," but, as undergraduates

often need to be reminded, characters are not "people," and they do not have lives outside their texts – one simply cannot say, of Shakespeare's dramatic victims, that "their state of mind may well be analogous to Lucrece's, although we are not let into the secret of their feelings" (p. 39).

Still, much intellectual recklessness might be forgiven for the sake of incisive and original readings. By decentring the hero of the "dominant plot" in favour of the victimization typically presented in an "inset plot," White purports to open up a text "as a presentation of ideas, conflicts and moral predicaments" (p. 114). In practice, his ethical grid works against such openness by re-compartmentalizing textual elements in terms of a binary opposition: "innocent victim," "guilty society." Distortions abound in aid of this dichotomy: Tarquin is implicitly treated as a representative of his society, not as a violator of its codes; Aarons's ("innocent") child is apparently killed off (the syntax is ambiguous [p. 27]), while the surviving Lucius is said to show himself "just as brutal and vindictive as anybody" (*ibid.*) by his unforgiving attitude towards the villains; Malcolm's feigned self-accusations are taken at face value (p. 51); Iago's impending punishment is ignored ("the worst thing . . . is that he *survives* [*sic*]" [p. 94]). White's own concept of the heroic appears to be as exclusive as those of the critics he attacks: Hamlet dies as a social reformer, wanting his story told "in a way that might lead to a measure of change in the attitudes of others" (p. 62). The author is not nearly conscious enough of his responsibility to make a case for disputable readings.

Clearly, he is preoccupied with the only case that matters to him: the case for his innocent victims. Yet it is hardly as if White transcends the "old questions" whose grip on Shakespeareans he so laments. He can regularly be found on the idealistic side of well-worn problematic issues: Hamlet's "I lov'd Ophelia . . ." is pure "spontaneous emotion" (p. 74); Lear's reconciliation with Cordelia involves a perfect communication "breaking through all the barriers that the misuse of words has placed between people" (p. 107). In fact, White spends so much of his time dealing with familiar aspects of the plays that the victims are once again short-changed. Merely to insist on their sufferings and to champion their innocence, as he does with what must be termed, I am afraid, overkill, is not to reread the texts from a new perspective. There is a lost opportunity here, whose scope we glimpse occasionally in some truly illuminating passages – for instance, on the "ballad world" in Ophelia's songs (pp. 70–73).

As for the impact he hopes to have on the critical scene, White surely dooms himself with the first word of the title: the author's liberal-humanist orientation is nowhere more evident than in his commitment to "innocence." In his "After Thoughts," White raises the difficulty of applying the concept of injustice, which he feels must depend upon an audience's "imaginative awareness" of an individual's suffering, in contrast with justice, a collective value which may be considered "rational, reasonable, and utilitarian" (p. 113). The appeal to subjective responses, the elevation of the individual above the social, most basically the value placed on

an essentialist self – these qualify, in the contemporary climate, as innocent indeed and themselves invite victimization. The tribunal of the new orthodoxies is bound to condemn White precisely in the name of social justice. As much as one might prefer to live in the world he dreams of, rather than in a world purged by firing squad, it must be admitted that his humane outlook, however militant, is not the stuff to make – or break – revolutions, either in the realm of the imagination or in any other.

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Records of Early English Drama, Devon, edited by John Wasson. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1986. Pp. lxxi, 623, 4 maps. \$95.00

Ian Lancashire. *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1984. Pp. lxxi, 633, 267 illustrations and maps. \$75.00.

With the publication in 1986 of the dramatic records of Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire (ed. Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield), and Devon, the Records of Early English Drama project has finally moved into the shires, where the distinct cultural landscape of villages, manors, monasteries and gentry households promises new perspectives on the dramatic activities of the late-medieval and early-modern periods to supplement those already provided by the great provincial cities (York, Chester, Coventry, Newcastle and Norwich) to which earlier REED volumes have been devoted. Against this background, in contrast, say, to the material from Norfolk and Suffolk which John Wasson edited earlier for the Malone Society (*Collections*, XI, 1980/1), *Devon* is something of a disappointment, however, for the best preserved and most informative Devon records, mainly in the form of corporation Receivers' accounts, are those of the larger boroughs (Barnstable, Dartmouth, Exeter, and Plymouth), where we are on the well-trodden ground of Corpus Christi pageants and plays, Midsummer watches, city waits, and payments to visiting minstrels, bearwards and players (as ever for unspecified plays). Out in the country, record-attrition has been extensive, verging on the wholesale: while relevant material survives for half of the county's boroughs, the corresponding figure for parishes is 10%; the financial accounts of Devon's ten abbeys provide but one item (a payment to a boy bishop), those of the resident gentry and nobility, none. Enough remains to make the "locating, transcribing and publishing" of the Devon material a massive scholarly achievement, but there is an understandable note of frustration in John Wasson's highly pertinent remarks (pp. xxvii-xxviii) on how limited (in relation to