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ends with bibliographic references for each. This catalogue is an extremely rich source for scholars and is an enormously important contribution to the literature.

SALLY HICKSON, *University of Guelph*

Fletcher, Angus.

Evolving Hamlet: Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection.

Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Pp. xvi, 192. ISBN 978-0-230-11168-4 (hardback) \$80.

In *Evolving Hamlet* Angus Fletcher adds to the growing body of scholarship on early modern natural philosophy and literature by suggesting that scholars might usefully consider literature as serving a peculiarly scientific function. Like the sciences, literature in Fletcher's view is intelligible as a series of approaches to solving specific puzzles. The puzzle Fletcher confronts here is the development of a system of practical, problem-based ethics. Rejecting ethics based in metaphysics or idealism as fundamentally too speculative, he turns to seventeenth-century tragedy as a source of diverse responses to particular ethical challenges resulting from the collapse of a "universal" ethics following the Reformation and later the Scientific Revolution. While the notion of theatre as an ethical laboratory is by now a familiar one, Fletcher's argument marks itself as distinctive in two ways. First, unlike many contemporary critics who read early modern plays through the lens of existing ethical systems, Fletcher examines these texts as themselves instruments of ethical formation. Early modern tragedy is concerned with responding to practical philosophical problems and is thus in effect its own peculiar form of philosophy. Second, Fletcher offers his literary history as an example of a form of Darwinian evolution, in which tragedy adapts itself over the course of time to confront new ethical problems, and to consider old ones differently. The book then positions itself as a qualified natural history of the seventeenth-century stage, in which the theatre serves as the venue where the intentionality of human artifice meets

to grapple with the unintentionally derived problems of real ethical behaviour, and produces early modern tragedy.

The analysis concentrates on dramatic responses to two phenomena that generated ethical crises: death, and the unknowability both of its arrival and of what may follow; and the emergence in the mid-seventeenth century of a new form of radical skepticism. The former was of particular concern following the tumultuous reversals of religious direction in England over the course of the sixteenth century, and plays such as Marlowe's *Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* began to wrestle with the idea of death more as a physical than as a metaphysical problem. This capacity of tragedy to treat practical problems as such — rather than reaching for idealistic solutions — develops further in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, each of which invokes the neo-Stoic concept of "partial belief" as the beginning of a basis for practical ethics. Brutus, Cassius, Horatio, and Hamlet consider the problem of the unknowability of death, and, unlike *Macbeth*, attempt to approach it from multiple perspectives. Belief, in this case, is in Fletcher's words "at once the determiner of definite action and the provisional basis for an evolving system of knowledge" (49). Neo-Stoic ethics, then, operate on a series of beliefs that are assumed to be prescriptive while at the same time acknowledging that the results of the actions so prescribed may force a re-evaluation of these beliefs. Fletcher is not the first critic to read these plays through a neo-Stoic lens, but his use of this particular concept produces a fascinating new reading of *Hamlet*, one in which the play's relevance to ethics is understood to be specifically practical rather than speculative.

Effective as the stage may have been in addressing old ethical problems, it also proved itself adaptable and was thus similarly effective in addressing new ones. Fletcher suggests that the heroic tragedies of John Dryden and the political philosophy of Hobbes might usefully be understood as responses to the emergent problem of paranoia derived from radical skepticism: if the mind is transparent only to itself and external phenomena are unreliable, then how can we achieve any kind of certainty about the dispositions of others? In *The Indian Emperour*, Dryden highlights the importance of judgment and action in forging ideas about common ethical practice and of how these ideas affect the welfare of others. Yet as he demonstrated in *The Conquest of Granada*, simply to elevate the status of judgment risks making nonsense of the very notion of ethical practice, for if judgment and action constitute the basis of ethics, then all

systemic ethical formation is simply coercion. Dryden returns to this concern in his Shakespeare adaptations *All for Love* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Here, he focuses on heroic protagonists who begin in states of solipsism but develop a Cartesian generosity in which self-esteem translates into concern for others. Fletcher concludes with two chapters in which he makes a persuasive case for the continuing relevance of seventeenth-century tragedy to contemporary ethical dilemmas.

Tightly focused as it is on the stage, one wonders whether the book is not a bit too summary in its dismissal of religion — and especially reformed Protestantism — as a source for practical ethics. Its goal, however, is to advocate for a particular method, and in doing so *Evolving Hamlet* is an impressive and valuable book. Perhaps most significantly, it represents literature as a body of knowledge that is possessed of a practical, instrumental utility. As such, Fletcher's book suggests an alternative way to understand the arts and humanities, one that comes at an opportune time, given the culturally embattled state of these disciplines. One crucial weakness in the ongoing defense of the humanities and the arts has been the inability of academics to theorize their purposes coherently without resorting to suspiciously neo-Romantic platitudes. This is especially evident in comparisons with the hard sciences. Against the internally consistent logic of empiricism, proponents of the humanities and the arts often fall into the habit of arguing that these disciplines are valuable precisely because they are fundamentally separate from the concerns of science; they probe and express the "human condition." *Evolving Hamlet* seeks to bridge this gap by suggesting that, in fact, literature, like science, can be deployed to solve particular problems — that it is valuable because it is deeply and urgently useful.

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