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Metropolitan Tragedy: Genre, Justice, and the City in Early Modern England / Marissa Greenberg

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Marissa Greenberg. *Metropolitan Tragedy: Genre, Justice, and the City in Early Modern England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 248 pp.

Reviewed by RONDA ARAB

Marissa Greenberg's *Metropolitan Tragedy: Genre, Justice, and the City in Early Modern England* seeks to put "early modern English tragedy back in its rightful place as an urban genre central to [a] longer tradition" that "identifies tragedy with the metropolis in transition" (5). While the book is not entirely successful in coherently weaving together and developing its various threads, *Metropolitan Tragedy* offers some worthy ideas about theatrical tragedy as an urban genre, the affective investments and effects of which mediated judicial concerns for early modern Londoners.

Greenberg's first chapter examines domestic tragedy, arguing that the genre offers audiences a reassuring fantasy of a secure metropolis "in response to perceptions of the cityscape as unknown, impenetrable, and fertile ground for the proliferation of crime" (22). Informed by Jean Howard's argument, in *Theater of a City*, that London plays made knowable the bewilderingly incomprehensible, ever-growing city, Greenberg asserts that domestic tragedy transforms the metropolis, by naming and revealing the city's labyrinthine streets, secret corners, private spaces, and unknown back alleys—those hidden places of potential crime—into a "less anonymous and more coherent" (24) place, one that is "geographically known" and "judicially secure" (25). Through their use of topographical specificity, Greenberg claims, plays such as Thomas Heywood's *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599) and Robert Yarrington's *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), both of which dramatize historical London murders of the recent past, "co-opt the scopic regime by which civic and state authorities attempted to recuperate London's places of crime and sin" (25). Seen, known, and revealed, locations of crime become less frightening, particularly when, as in the case of Shooter's Hill in *A Warning For Fair Women*, the murder scene is also shown to be the scene of punishment. Audiences are lulled, at least temporarily, into imagining that "the metropolis is itself judicially secure" (25), as it "assumes the comprehensive geography of placeless justice" (25). This is a compelling argument, and among the best in the book, but its rhetorical execution lacks a tight coherency. For instance, on multiple occasions Greenberg invokes the sense of "placeless justice" created by urban domestic tragedy, but beyond a brief discussion of *placelessness* (and also *overplacedness* and *recalcitrant* space) in the Introduction, does not explain her understanding or the particulars of her usage of the term; similarly, she refers to the "scopic regime of London's judicial authorities" (28) but neither defines the concept nor offers any details of how the "scopic regime" operated.

In Chapter 2, "*Translatio Metropolitae* and Early English Revenge Tragedy," Greenberg examines intersections of empire and metropolis, arguing that revenge tragedy enacts the "recursive violence" (47) historically attendant on cities of

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imperial eminence. International prominence, she notes, “promised not simply achievement; it also threatened rebellion and ruin” (48). Using Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Greenberg contends that “the formal structure of revenge tragedy is the movement of return”: “the physical return to the metropolis” is linked in the play to retributive violence, while the act of seeking vengeance “returns boomerang-like” (49) on avengers. While these are smart points, problematically, distinctions between Revenge (personified and/or embodied) and revenge (an abstraction with materiality only in its very real consequences) are made loosely and inconsistently throughout the chapter. Greenberg traces “the movements of Revenge through the metropolis” (49), describing how “She enters Rome on the heels of Titus’s triumphal entrance, follows Lavinia to the woods and processes to the scaffold with Martius and Quintus, then reenters the city alongside Lucius and his foreign army” (49). Significantly, Greenberg argues that “these movements chart the recursive trajectory of revenge tragedy as *embodied movements* in urban space” (49, my emphasis). Slightly later, however, Greenberg acknowledges that there *is* no actual feminized and personified Revenge figure entering the city with Titus (as implied above), that the movements she has traced are not, in fact, those of an embodied Revenge, but are actually figurative:

The opening scene of *Titus* thus implies the figurative entrance of revenge, although it is not until the penultimate scene that the play directly evokes the physical movements of an allegorical Revenge. (51)

Nevertheless, Greenberg continues to trace the movements of what can only be understood as an allegorical Revenge figure, particularly given that she juxtaposes this Revenge figure with “the play’s non-allegorical characters”:

Revenge follows an identical itinerary through the metropolis. She enters the *polis* along the same processional route to the Capital as Titus’s triumphal entrance, and from this locus of political, civic, and religious authority, she moves to the ‘vast...woods’ and ‘sandy plot[s]’ (4.1.53. 4.1.68) of greater Rome, then along its ‘wicked streets’ (5.2.98) and to its residences (‘old Titus’ . . . house’ 5.3.141). As Revenge’s car rumbles between Rome’s centre and its periphery, retracing the path of the play’s non-allegorical characters, it accumulates a gruesome pile. (53)

Tamora, of course, appears dressed as Revenge in 5.2, and Titus, speaking to her tells her to “look round about the wicked streets of Rome” (5.2.98); however, in the other scenes Greenberg cites here, there is no allegorical Revenge character “retracing the path of the play’s non-allegorical characters” (53), making Greenberg’s argument confusing in the extreme. More convincingly, Greenberg later argues that the play suggests “the recursive movement of revenge” when

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Titus, faced with “his severed hand and dead sons’ heads, his violated daughter and exiled son” (54) asks “Then which way shall I find Revenge’s cave?” (3.1.269). Titus, Greenberg writes, “must seek out a figure previously unknown in Rome and return with her to the city where she may return pain and loss upon his tormentors” (54). Here we can imagine an *abstract* personified Revenge, evoked by Titus, moving into the city. Nevertheless, it is hard to conceptualize this as Revenge’s “*embodied* movements in urban space” (49, my emphasis) since no body on the stage embodies Revenge making the return to Rome.

A weakness throughout the book is the tenuousness of the links between some sections of a chapter, or the dropping of key topic points. Chapter 2 ends with a section entitled “Returning to London,” wherein representations of London Bridge and its notorious displays of the heads of traitors are discussed, along with their complex function to “naturalize law and order in the metropolis” (72) and signify the workings of authority. While it’s easy to imagine that connections exist between this and the revenge tragedy genre that is the topic of the rest of the chapter, the reader is left to herself to actually draw those conclusions. Earlier in the chapter, a section entitled “Processing to the Scaffold” begins by linking the disciplinary procession of *Titus Andronicus* with the familiar London sight of disciplinary vehicles transporting “both petty criminals and capital offenders” through the city, but by the middle of the section, the discussions of motions, emotions, audience response, and even judicial procedure are linked only non-specifically with urban life. A similar problem exists in Chapter 3, “Tyrant Tragedy and the Tyranny of Tragedy in Stuart London,” which argues “tragedy represents tyranny as a problem of the metropolis” (77). The most fascinating aspects of Greenberg’s argument in this chapter hinge on the affective power of tragedy on audiences and its potentially tyrannical implications, for instance, by compelling the torment of catharsis; however, arguments for locating the effects of tragedy in the metropolis, and particularly in the London metropolis, are stretched.

Greenberg’s final chapter, “Noise, the Great Fire, and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*” is probably the strongest, and certainly the most coherent of the book. Observing that Milton “saturates his tragedy with representations of urban place” (109) and that the “experience of London’s destruction is at the heart of Milton’s tragic project” (109), Greenberg effectively demonstrates striking parallels in contemporary discussions of the Great Fire and in the rhetorical strategies of Milton’s tragedy, making much of how both the Great Fire of London and *Samson Agonistes* represent urban catastrophe as an aural experience. Greenberg ultimately argues that Milton’s dramatic tragedy “takes the sounds of urban ruin and divine judgement” (123) to challenge readers to become “skilful auditors” (134) for whom right hearing leads to right feeling and right doing. This involves, Greenberg argues, denying readers a cathartic experience. Milton “stirs up passions through representations of the sounds of rumours, celebration, suffering, and ruin” (133) but rather than resolving the tragedy with “an acoustic experience capable of purging readers of pity [and] fear,” he instead ends with further discord in order “to confront readers with the same choices of interpretation and response that they had during and after the Great Fire” (131).

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With a substantive edit, *Metropolitan Tragedy: Genre, Justice, and the City in Early Modern England* would be a much better book. It is nevertheless valuable for its contribution to our understanding of the place of the city in theatrical tragedy, an area of study that calls for and deserves more scholarly attention.

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