Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus To Armageddon

John Kerrigan

Revenge has long been central to European culture. From Homer to Nietzsche, St Paul to Sylvia Plath, numerous major authors have been fascinated by its emotional intensity, and by the questions which it raises about violence, sexuality, death, and the nature of justice.

In this exceptionally learned and lively book, John Kerrigan explores the literature of vengeance from Greek tragedy to postmodernism, ranging through material in several languages, as well as through opera, painting, and film, while opening new perspectives on such familiar English works as Hamlet, Clarissa, and The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. By means of broad historical analysis, but also through subtle attention to the fabric of individual texts, Kerrigan shows how evolving attitudes to retribution have shaped and reconstituted tragedy in the West, and elucidates the remarkable capacity of the revenge tragedy, or revenge play, in which the protagonist seeks revenge for an imagined or actual injury. The term, revenge tragedy, was first introduced in 1900 by A.H. Thorndike to label a class of plays written in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras (circa 1580s to 1620s). Most scholars argue that the revenge tragedies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries stemmed from Roman tragedy, in particular, Seneca's Thyestes. Seneca's tragedies followed three main