

Response to Christopher Wessman, "Marlowe's *Edward II* as 'Actaeonesque History'"*

FELICIA BONAPARTE and JAKOB STERN

If Christopher Wessman is right in his suggestive and enlightening essay, and we are convinced he is, one way to describe what Marlowe does by embedding the myth of Actaeon in his historical play is to say, as might Walter Benjamin, that Marlowe uses the myth of Actaeon to turn a *trauerspiel* into a tragedy. According to Benjamin in *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, tragedy is grounded in myth, *trauerspiel* in history. Fulfilling a sacrificial design, tragedy is universal, transcendent. The *trauerspiel*, on the other hand, is bound to this world, tied to the fact, often tied to the particular. The protagonist of a tragedy, above the gods in his realization that he is greater than his fate, has no one to whom to lament his destiny. In contrast, the making of a lament is the very point of the *trauerspiel*.¹ This appears to be a distinction Marlowe, in Wessman's reading, intuitively grasps. The title identifies Edward's death not as tragic but as "lamentable" and it is only near his end, when he faces the fulfillment of his mythic sacrifice, that he confers a tragic status retrospectively on himself by saying to Lightborn: "I see my tragedy written in thy brows" (V.v.76).

As Wessman observes, this act of embedding myth into historical fact is projected at the beginning when Gaveston describes the entertainments he will devise to delight his Edward. But it is important to stress that the myth of Actaeon is to be performed in a way very different from the rest. "Italian masks" are planned "by night" (I.i.55). Clearly, these are dramatic performances at which Edward will make the audience. The myth of Actaeon, however, is to be dramatized "in the day" and not on a stage

*Reference: Christopher Wessman, "Marlowe's *Edward II* as 'Actaeonesque History'" *Connotations* 9.1 (1999/2000): 1-33.

but when Edward "shall walk abroad" (I.i.57), going about his daily business. Thus, as Gaveston envisions it, this mythic reenactment, like none of the other distractions he projects for Edward's pleasure, is precisely analogous to the structure of the play, which embeds the myth in fact, in reality, in history.

But it is also, it seems to us, an analogue to a confusion that is one source of Edward's tragedy.

The myth of Actaeon is apparently one of the most archaic in the Greek corpus. It is one of those myths that belong to the pre-agricultural stratum and that include a number of uncanny elements. Such myths speak of inadvertent, catastrophic human error, of youths seized by nymphs who dwell in the woods and springs of which they are embodiments, as Hylas, for example, is seized by the nymphs of the pool.² A familiar aspect of these myths as well as one of their oldest features is that very sense of sight that Wessman has described so well in his essay, sight as dangerous penetration, a motif that is grounded in the ancient belief that sight is physical contact. It is this very seeing/touching, defiling/raping of what ought not to be seen or touched (Artemis and Athena, for instance) that typically produces either blindness, as in the Callimachean myth of Teiresias, or death by being rent apart (*sparagmos*), as in the myths of Pentheus and Actaeon.

Modern readings of Actaeon tend to take his myth—the myth of the hunter, the marginal figure of the wilderness—as a typical representation of an initiation rite, one that must take the youth from adolescence, associated with the wild, the world especially of Artemis, to adulthood, the world of Zeus and Hera, which is associated with civic life.³ Many mythological heroes (Theseus and Jason, for example) make the transition with heroic success. Others (such as Daphne and Hylas) are either captured in the wild or are literally torn apart in attempting the transition (Hippolytus and Actaeon). A specific characteristic of this mythological pattern is that the transition is frequently defined in sexual terms as a passing from a homosexual to a heterosexual relationship. The marginal figure of the wild—especially the figure who fails to accomplish the passage to adulthood—may be portrayed as either sexless (Hippolytus) or as the homosexual beloved of an older lover (Ganymede/Zeus, Hylas/Herakles).⁴ And this again is something Marlowe appears to have intuited, for he

alludes not only to Actaeon but to Hylas (I.1.144; I.iv.395) and Ganymede (I.iv.181), understanding, it would seem, that they constitute a category.

Not everything here applies to Marlowe's play. What does apply, in our opinion, is the fundamental distinction between the wilderness and the state, and the life appropriate to each. Edward in choosing Gaveston and rejecting Isabella can be understood as choosing to remain in the wilderness rather than accepting his responsibilities in the life of the state and of history. It is interesting that the peers do not object to his having a minion, whom they accept with modern aplomb. Indeed, the Elder Mortimer offers a cluster of antecedents which bunch together myth and history: Alexander and Hephaestion, Hercules and Hylas, Patroclus and Achilles, Tully and Octavius, Socrates and Alcibiades (I.iv.393-99) and Young Mortimer replies: "Uncle, his wanton humour grieves not me." What they object to is the introduction of Gaveston into affairs of state. The state, the making of history, is the business of civic life, a world to which the relationship of Edward and Gaveston does not belong. It is not insignificant that Marlowe reminds us that it is Isabella who is England's link to France, to international relations. Gaveston is clearly drawn as someone who can only function in Edward's mythological wilderness. By bringing him into civic affairs Edward confuses the two worlds precisely as Gaveston had confused them in his paradigmatic projection of the myth into Edward's daily life.

Kept to the wilderness, myth is a figurative, not a literal truth. The entertainment Gaveston plans is delightful because Actaeon in it will only "seem to die" (I.i.70). But enacted historically, Marlowe appears here to suggest, it can only be realized literally. Carried into affairs of state, those who embody Actaeon are required to die in fact. And this translation of figure to fact has the effect of turning the myth into a parody of itself. As the hunter becomes the hunted—and Actaeon and Diana, as Wessman shows, play both these parts, as do Edward and Gaveston—Edward, in what can only be a grotesque parody of Diana standing in the sylvan pool, is found "in a vault up to the knees in water / To which the channels of the castle run" (V.v.23).

Although Edward is not torn asunder, his surrogate, Gaveston, is in part, at least in that he is beheaded, and Young Mortimer is completely. Mortimer is the only character described as "tragicall" in the title but he

does not begin his tragedy until Edward has ended his. As Isabella sees her son come to take vengeance on the two of them, she bestows a tragic status on the remainder of their lives: "Now, Mortimer, begins our tragedy" (V.vi.23). Marlowe has clearly continued the tragedy by passing it on to Mortimer and he has done so by letting Mortimer experience the final phase of the myth: "Bring him," orders Edward III, "unto a hurdle, drag him forth; / Hang him, I say, and set his quarters up: / But bring his head back presently to me" (V.vi.54-56). And the fact that Edward III arrives with the peers and not with a minion signals that he has already entered the civic duties his father disdained.

Postscript: In the progress of discussing the relationship between Marlowe's play and the myth of Actaeon as Christopher Wessman's essay develops it, we thought of what seems an odd coincidence. Everyone knows that Marlowe died under somewhat mysterious circumstances in a brawl at Deptford Inn. Many believe his death was an accident, the end of an unfortunate scuffle. But there has always been speculation that Marlowe was a government agent and that, knowing too much perhaps, he was killed for political reasons. In this connection it is interesting that, in his effort to explain his own mysterious exile at the hands of the Emperor Augustus, Ovid in his *Tristia* refers to the myth of Actaeon and to Actaeon's seeing Artemis naked, implying that he too had peered unwittingly into what should not have been seen (an imperial scandal?):

Cur aliquid vidi? Cur noxia lumina feci?
 Cur imprudenti cognita culpa mihi?
 Inscius Actaeon vidit sine ueste Dianam.
 Praeda fuit canibus non minus ille suis. (2.103-06)

The City University of New York

NOTES

¹Here we are summarizing (and, necessarily, simplifying) the argument of the second section, "Trauerspiel und Tragödie," of Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963).

²For the myth of Actaeon and its archaic nature see P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 80-90; 197-201; K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1992) 127 ff.; T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 478-81. For the myth of Actaeon in Callimachus (and the parallel myth of Teiresias and Athene) see *Callimachus: The Fifth Hymn*, ed. A. W. Bulloch (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) 22 *passim*. Marlowe, of course, would know the myth from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.138-252, the fullest ancient version. For the myth of Hylas see Theocritus, *Idyll 13* and Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1.1207 ff.

³The 'initiation school' has now won the day in mythological theory—the names of H. Jeanmaire, A. Brelich, W. Burkert and C. Calame come to mind—although skeptics, among them Forbes Irving (above, note 2), can still be found who stress the infrequency of good evidence from Greek rituals of the classical period. For a reasoned and sane evaluation see H. S. Versnel, "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. L. Edmunds (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 23-91. The essential problem is well stated by Dowden (above, note 2) 102, who, although he subscribes to the initiation-theory, nonetheless states: "[. . .] even if the method does deliver results, it tells us about the prehistoric significance of the myth and not what it meant to Greeks of classical times." For the application of this approach to the myth of Actaeon see B. Sergent, *Homosexuality in Greek Myth*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon P, 1986) 228-34 and more generally for such hunters as Hippolytus, Melanion and Atalanta see P. Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 117-22.

⁴It is noteworthy, as Sergent (above, note 3) has discussed, that the myth of Actaeon can also be found in antiquity in a rationalized, historicized version. The text, in Pseudo-Plutarch's *Love Stories* 2 (*Moralia* 772D-773B), tells the story of a certain Actaeon—not in this case the famous Actaeon of Boeotia to whom Marlowe refers, but rather an Actaeon of Corinth, the son of Melissus. The tale narrates how a Corinthian named Archias of an influential noble family became enamored of the young and modest Actaeon and set out one day with a group of his drunken friends to kidnap the young man. But Melissus and Actaeon's friends resisted, until, as the story specifies, Actaeon suffered a *sparagmos*, being torn limb from limb by the two groups pulling him apart as they strove to possess him. Thus the mythic ritual is transformed into a realistic event. Melissus later displayed his son's torn body and ultimately committed suicide by hurling himself down a cliff. There followed a plague and consultation of the oracle which led to the exile of Archias. Indeed, homosexual passion of an elder for a younger man becomes a stock motif in Greek history and pseudo-historical narrative in stories telling of the overthrow of tyrants: the case of the regicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton in Athens (Thucydides 6.54 ff.) is the most famous instance. In the case of Actaeon of Corinth it is no longer hunting dogs, but rather his lover—his *erastes*—by whom he is torn apart. The parallel to Edward II and Gaveston is not exact, but in structural terms this rationalization of the myth does at least clearly demonstrate that homosexuality can replace in the historicized version the visual rape of Diana in the myth. And that ultimately is the basis of the connection between Actaeon and Edward.