Introduction

There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdst
But in his motion like an Angell sings,
Still quiring to the young eyde Cherubins;
Such harmonie is in immortall soules,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Dooth grosly close it in, we cannot heare it.

(Merchant of Venice, v.1.60-5)

In this concert, one ideological State apparatus certainly has
the dominant role, although hardly any one lends an ear to its
music; it is so silent!

(Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses')

ELIZABETHAN WORLD PICTURES

In a lecture dedicated to the memory of Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams once admitted that he had spent years trying to
escape from that notorious bête noire with which every student of
English Literature has to do battle – the Elizabethan World
Picture. It may have been a fascinating thing in itself, said
Williams, but for him it often seemed to be more of a hindrance
than a help when it actually came to reading the drama of the
period.¹

The Elizabethan World Picture is the title E. M. W. Tillyard gave to
a small book he published in 1943 as an offshoot of his influential
Shakespeare’s History Plays. It refers to that remarkable gramarye of
post-medieval cosmological, political and ethical doctrine in which
every educated Elizabethan was supposed to believe without demur
or reservation. Fundamental to this world view is the idea of
harmony: individual psychology, family relations, politics – all were
evoked in musical metaphors; in fact it is a favourite maxim among
Renaissance writers that the world itself is made of music. It is these
ideas, their representation in literature and other cultural forms, and their political appropriation that are my subject.

For some decades after its publication The Elizabethan World Picture was popularly regarded as the authoritative intellectual history of the period. This was in spite of the fact that the book had already begun to be challenged by the early 1950s on the grounds of its schematic and reductive view of Elizabethan habits of thought. Over the next thirty years the sense that Tillyard had related only part of a highly complicated narrative was confirmed as specialists working in the closely related fields of Elizabethan cosmology, politics, legal theory and poetics all contributed to the task of completing the story he had begun. It has become clear from this expanded narrative that the later sixteenth century was a period characterized not so much by its unquestioning acceptance of a monolithic body of quasi-official doctrine as by its vigorous scepticism. What Tillyard took to be a unified world view commanding universal assent is perhaps better seen as a ‘strategy of containment’, to use Frederic Jameson’s terms, a device whose ability to provide Elizabethan society with an intellectually and emotionally satisfying account of itself depended on the degree to which it was capable of effacing that society’s underlying contradictions. As one of a number of competing ideologies, the so-called Elizabethan World Picture can be more accurately designated by a term that Tillyard himself used to describe a contemporary body of specifically historiographical and political doctrine – the Tudor Myth. When it is apparent that Tillyard’s narrative deals, not with history, but with myth, the reasons for its elegant simplicity become clear. As Roland Barthes puts it in his seminal Mythologies, ‘myth acts economically; it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, without any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions’. Though this is not the way he himself saw it, it is in fact just such a world that Tillyard evokes in The Elizabethan World Picture.

THE MUSICIAN-KING

That the Elizabethans were quite capable of deconstructing their own myths of order is evident from a poem like Hero and Leander. Marlowe’s poem survives only as a fragment. It breaks off at a
moment of extreme lyrical beauty when gods and mortals are apparently united in cosmic harmony. As the fated couple’s first night of illicit love draws to its end Hero tries to hide herself, unhappy at the thought of a prying sun discovering her secret. But so dramatic is her transfiguration by the pleasures of ‘this blessed night’ that her radiance, filling the room with light, deceives Hesperus into thinking that it is time to prepare Apollo’s chariot. And so before dawn is actually due to break, ‘ougly night’ is banished, the sun rises and the world is filled with the sound of celestial music. As the climax, both of love’s inevitable course, and also of Marlowe’s narrative, the scene is nothing less than an epiphany, a visionary revelation of the glories of youthful passion. But as is usually the case with such moments of intense lyrical beauty in Marlowe, it is a deeply ironic scene. Though Marlowe died before he could complete the story, its tragic conclusion is anticipated in another tale of illicit love that he tells in *Hero and Leander*. This is the story of Mercury and Herse.7

The Mercury story is a myth-of-origin. It explains why it is that Fate will always be hostile to poets and lovers. Fresh from his defeat of Argus, the precocious young god is captivated by the unspoilt charms of a country maiden. Mercury knows well that ‘Maidens are not soon by brutish force and might, / But speeches full of pleasure and delight’ (1.419–20) and deploys all his legendary rhetorical skills in his attempt to win her. Flattered though she is by such eloquent attentions, the shepherdess has enough presence of mind to impose a task on her illustrious lover as a price for submitting to his energetic charms. She demands that he steal a cup of nectar from the gods. Mercury is no innocent in the art of theft and audaciously helps himself from Jupiter’s own cup. For his crime he is banished from heaven. However, Mercury is nothing if not enterprising and quickly plans his revenge: he persuades Cupid to intercede with the Destinies on his behalf. They agree; Saturn is reinstated on the throne that his son had usurped, and Mercury is readmitted to heaven. But this is not the end of the story. Angry at Mercury’s subsequent ingratitude, the Destinies now revoke their decree and restore Jupiter, banishing Mercury once more from heaven. Such is Mercury’s resource, however, that not even the cruel Destinies can suppress him for ever. But though they cannot prevent him gaining access to heaven’s court, they still have the power to impose a curse on their disrespectful protégé. Their malediction is a mythological
account of why writers will always be poor and at odds with authority:

Yet as a punishment they added this,
That he and Poverty should alwaies kiss.
And to this day is everie scholler poore,
Grosse gold, from them runs headlong to the boore.
Likewise the angrie sisters thus deluded,
To venge themselves on Hermes, have concluded
That Midas brood shall sit in Honors chaire,
To which the Muses sonnes are only heir:
And fruitfull wits that in aspiring are,
Shall discontent run into regions farre;
And few great lords in vertuous deeds shall joy,
But be surpris’d with every garish toy
And still enrich the loftie servile clowne,
Who with incroching guile, keeps learning downe. (1.469-82)

Mercury is a complex figure. He is noted for his eloquence, and
for his silence; he is a representative of order, and of trickery; he is a
type of the probing intellect, and he is sexually precocious. His
ambivalent character is symbolic of the dual nature of the arts of
which he is patron. As Marlowe portrays him – libidinous, plausible,
theiving, disrespectful – he is an embodiment of everything that
authority finds most threatening. The story of his affair with Herse
and his provocation of Fate serves in part to prepare the way for the
tragic end that, as we know from Musaeus, awaits Hero and
Leander. But Marlowe’s story is more than just a racy myth-of-
origin accounting for the fact that the course of true love never did
run smooth: it is also an ironic inversion of the familiar humanist
myth of the birth of civilization.

As an exemplar of the art of eloquence, Mercury is traditionally
linked in humanist mythology with those symbolic founders of
civilization, Amphion, Arion, and Orpheus. According to Horace it
was Mercury who first tamed man’s savage nature when he gave
him the power of speech. The myth is well known to sixteenth-
century readers. The Preface to Thomas Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique*
(1560) embodies a representative version of it. Combining Christian
theology with echoes of Ovid’s account of the four ages of the world
(*Metamorphoses*, 1.89–150), Wilson tells how fallen humanity was
wooed from a state of nomadic barbarity by the civilizing power of
elocution. This is the reason, he says, why poets have represented
Hercules as a figure of such great symbolic significance:
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For his witte was so great, his tongue so eloquent, and his experience such, that no one man was able to withstande his reason, but every one was rather druen to doe that which he would, and to will that which he did: agreeing to his aduise both in word and worke in all that euer they were able. Neither can I see that men could haue beene brought by any other meanes, to liue together in fellowship of life, to maintaine Citties, to dele truely, and willingly obeye one an other, if men at the first had not by art and eloquence, [been] perswaded [of] that which they full oft found out by reason.\(^{11}\)

In its broad outlines Wilson’s version of the humanist myth of the birth of civilization is entirely conventional. Though it happens to be Hercules in this case who is cast in the role of symbolic civilizer of humanity, his name is interchangeable with those of Amphion, Arion, Orpheus, and of course Mercury himself, original inventor of the lyre. Characterized by Henryson in the Testament of Creisid as ‘Richt eloquent and full of rethorie, / With polite termis and delicious . . . Setting sangis and singand merelie’\(^{12}\), Mercury is noted above all for his mastery of those arts that were regarded by Renaissance humanists as the very foundation of civilized life. Ben Jonson observes that ‘Speech is the only benefit man hath to expresse his excellencie of mind above other creatures. It is the Instrument of Society.’ Echoing Horace, he goes on to explain that this is the reason why ‘Mercury, who is the President of Language, is called Doenem hominumque interpres’\(^{13}\).

Presidency of Language is an office whose holder enjoys powers of a prodigious kind. As Wilson insists, a man of eloquence is capable of persuading people to do whatever he wishes. However, the real mark of his power is not his ability to force people ‘to yeeld in that which most standeth against their will’\(^{14}\), but rather his skill in inducing them ‘to will that which he did’. Social control, in other words, is achieved not only by coercion but, as Gramsci argues, by appropriating culture in such a way that people willingly consent to their domination.\(^{15}\) The man of eloquence who, by introducing letters, persuades a barbarous nation to forsake its brutal practices and embrace the constraints of civilization is essentially a figure of authority. The truth contained in the myth is one that was understood perfectly well by the great sixteenth-century educators. In establishing a systematic programme of state education designed to equip a rising middle class for its new hegemonic role in the Tudor administration, men like Colet, Ascham and Mulcaster perceived
very clearly the power that lay in mastery of rhetoric. Such is the force of affective language that a skilful orator might ‘with a word . . . winne Cities and whole Countries’.16

In addition to his mastery of the civilizing arts of poetry and song, Mercury is conventionally associated with authority and government through the caduceus that is his emblematic staff of office. A symbolic reminder of another of Mercury’s exploits – his pacification of two fighting serpents – the caduceus is an emblem of peace, control, government, and ultimately monarchy itself.17 In both his pagan and his Christian manifestations the musician-king is a key figure in the structure of Renaissance thought. His unique position is a function of the universal law of correspondence. In a classic account of this familiar principle Pierre de La Primaudyen explains in his enormously popular French Academie (1577; English trans. 1586) how elements, individuals, families, states all form part of a universal pattern of divinely instituted order:

As we see that in the body of this vniversall frame, there is (as the Philosophers say) matter, forme, priuation, simplicitie, mixture, substantie, quantitie, action and passion, and that the whole world being compounded of unlike elementes, of earth, water, ayre and fire, is notwithstanding preserued by an Analogie and proportion, which they haue together: and as we see in a mans body, head, hands, feete, eyes, nose, ears: in a house the husband, wife, children, master, seruantes: in a politike body, magistrates, nobles, common people, artificers; and that every body mingled with heate, cold, drie and moyst, is preserued by the same reason of analogie and proportion which they haue together: So is it in every common-wealth well appointed and ordrerd, which consisting of many and sundry subjectes, is maintained by their vnite, being brought to be of one consent & wil, and to communicate their works, artes and exercises together for common benefit & profit.18

Since the order of the universe consisted in the harmonious reconciliation of opposing or discordant qualities,19 it followed from the doctrine of correspondence that the same principles of harmony must obtain in any well-regulated state. Popularizing those Pythagorean ideas of world harmony that had been transmitted to the Middle Ages by the Church Fathers, La Primaudyen explains how the structure of the orderly society depends on musical principles:

A citie or ciuill company is nothing else but a multitude of men vnlike in estates or conditions, which communicate together in one place their artes, occupations, workes and exercises, that they may live the better, & are
obedient to the same lawes and magistrates ... Of such a dissimilitude an harmonicall agreement ariseth by due proportion of one towards another in their diuers orders & estates, euen as the harmonie in musicke consisteth of vnequal voyces or sounds agreeing equally togetherr.\footnote{20}

Because it was a widely accepted truth that 'all things that mooure within this generall globe are maintained by agreeing discords',\footnote{21} La Primaunday's musical simile has the value not so much of a trope as of literal analogy: the principle that underlies the harmony of a consort of four dissimilar voices 'agreeing equally togethers is one and the same as that which integrates the harmonious community. The same rule of analogy applies equally to the individual. 'Looke vpon the frame, & workmanship of the whole worlde', writes John Case in a treatise entitled The Praise of Musique, 'whether there be not aboue, an harmony between the spheres, beneath a simbolisme between the elements. Looke vpon a man, whome the Philosophers termed a little world, whether the parts accord not one to the other by consent and vnity.'\footnote{22}

Deriving his authority from heaven and responsible for guaranteeing on earth, through the agency of his paternal love for his subjects, that harmony which is the defining feature of the cosmos, the musician-king is, as Jonson says of Mercury, \textit{deorum hominumque interpres}. Although Renaissance versions of the Arion/Orpheus/Mercury myth have many variants, their symbolic purpose is broadly similar. In allegorizing the story of the poet-musician who delights the world with his magically persuasive songs, and turning it into a fable about the preservation of social harmony, humanist poets and rhetoricians were transforming contemporary political reality into myth. When Ulysses delivers his portentous warnings about the catastrophic consequences of untuning the string of degree his patrician rhetoric is likely to persuade all but the most critical that these are authentic universal truths: to question 'primogenitue and due of birth / Prerogatiue of age, crownes, scepters, lawrels' (\textit{Troy.}, i.iii.106–7) is to defy nature herself. However, stripped of their cloak of mystifying lattinisms, the same sentiments reveal their crudely partisan purpose. Stephen Gosson puts the case in rather blunter language:

If privat men be suffered to forsake their calling because they desire to walke gentlemen like in sattine & velvet, with a buckler at their heels, proportion is so broken, unitie dissolved, harmony confounded, that the whole body must be dismembred, and the prince or heade cannot chuse but sicken.\footnote{23}
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So much for the ladder of all high designs.

That _Herod_ and _Leander_ should have provoked such an aggressively moralistic response as Chapman’s sequel is not really surprising. For in representing the poet-musician not as an authority figure dispensing laws to a recalcitrant humanity, but as a rebel who challenges a corrupt establishment, Marlowe is subverting one of the age’s ruling ideas and exposing it for the political fable that it is. For all its delicious verbal beauties and its tender evocation of love’s awakening, _Herod_ and _Leander_ is no sentimental romance. Although the fragment ends with an image of universal harmony, we have already been warned by Mercury’s story that this apparent truce between man and fate is, like the dawn, a false one. If there is an underlying motif in this most Ovidian of Elizabethan epyllions, it is not harmony, but conflict – between youth and age; between passion and wisdom; between learning and wealth; between men and gods. The binary world it evokes is one in which authority, instead of uniting its subjects in loving concord, guarantees perpetual strife by ‘keep[ing] learning downe’ and ensuring ‘That Midas brood shall sit in Honors chaire.’

The Power of Myth

The humanist myth of the birth of civilization through song has its origins in classical poetics. In Horace’s allegorization of the Orpheus story ( _Ars poetica_ , 391–401) the Renaissance found a model that served as a basis for its own mythical account of the process by which authority persuades its subjects willingly to accept the rule of law. The chapters in part I of this book deal with three variations on the theme of the prince who restores harmony to a discordant society.

Governments have always used myth to sanction power. However, at the Reformation the Tudor administration was faced with an urgent need radically to reshape social attitudes. It is here that England witnessed the beginnings of that cult of regal quasi-divinity which is such a remarkable feature of the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign. Portraying the British as ‘a chosen and peculiar people’, Elizabethan pamphleteers represent their queen as a semi-divine figure sent by God to fulfil the historic task of defeating popery and restoring the authentic primitive church. By the last two decades of the sixteenth century it is not just pamphleteers but poets, dramatists, painters, and composers who contribute to the
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cult of Elizabeth. The central document in this extraordinary body of propaganda is Spenser’s Faerie Queene. As Stephen Greenblatt rightly says, Spenser is fascinated by power and does everything he can to link his own art with its symbolic and literal forms. Taking on himself the office of epic recorder of his nation’s providential role in world history, Spenser reveals, through a complex network of typological parallels linking past, present, and future, the processes by which God’s purpose is about to be fulfilled in this, the latter end of time. Ironically, it is in the context of an increasingly militaristic international political environment – reflected in the wanton violence with which Astraea’s deputy Talus suppresses rebellion – that Spenser depicts his patron as a ‘Prince of peace from heaven blessed’ (iv.proem.4). In a world divided by religious conflict, only ‘a God or godlike man’ can restore harmony. Such a man was Orpheus, who

when strife was grown
Amongst those famous ympes of Greece, did take
His siluer Harpe in hand, and shortly friends them make. (iv.ii.1)

Although he does not compare himself explicitly with Orpheus, it is clear that Spenser is referring to his own poetic art when he defines Orpheus’ ‘musick’ as ‘wise words with time concented’ (iv.ii.2). Spenser’s own medium is language. But appropriately enough for a poet who, like Gower, wanted his name to be associated with one of the classical exemplars of eloquence, his poem is full of music; in fact music is one of its key images, linking together all three levels of allegory – the topological, the historical and the analogical. In considering the political significance of these images in chapter 1 I shall focus on the Bower of Bliss, an episode that has probably attracted more critical attention than any other in Spenser’s poem.

It is well known that St John’s Revelation provides the symbolic framework for the apocalyptic elements in Spenser’s political allegory. Despite the growing influence of the new political historiography exemplified by Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the key to the meaning of political events for the great majority of sixteenth-century Protestants was still the Bible. Drawing on contemporary interpretations of Revelation as a prophecy of the Protestant destruction of the Babylon-that-is-Rome, Spenser sets the drama of Christian life in the wider historical context of a battle between church and Antichrist. In doing so he both reflects and contributes
to that aggressively nationalist mythology that is characteristic of England in the 1590s. Acrasia’s seductive music stands not only for the temptations of the flesh, but also, historically, for the beguiling voice of religious dissent. Only if that siren music is ruthlessly silenced (sirens were a traditional figure for those heretical doctrines that threatened to undermine the church’s authority) will God’s chosen people be free to sing the triumphal New Song of an elect nation. The ferocity with which Guyon performs his task may be, as Greenblatt argues, a classic example of the way authority deals with supposedly demonic threats to established order.31 Historically, though, it is a measure of the apocalyptic significance of his mission. As St John had prophesied, when Babylon fell its destruction would be marked by violence of cataclysmic proportions (18:21), so gloriana’s agent acts in a manner appropriate to his role as champion of God’s chosen people against Antichrist; his violence is a sign of his predestined role in international affairs.

When Spenser implicitly compares his own art with that of Orpheus, the effect is to align himself with the authority Orpheus represents. The Christian counterpart of the musician-king who brings harmony to a discordant world through the magic of his songs is the Pauline New Man (Eph. 4:24). In patristic theology the New Man is he who sings not the old music of the pagan minstrels, but the New Song of Christ, the ‘supreme musician of the world’;32 he is Orpheus redivivus. Reinterpreted by sixteenth-century reformers as a type of the elect, the New Man takes on a specifically political role as shaper of a new independent Christian state in which ‘Governement, though high and low, and lower, / Put into parts, doth keepe in one consent, / Congreeng in a full and natural close, / Like Musicke’ (H5, i.iii.181–4). It is just such a role that Shakespear’s Prince Hal fashions for himself (see chapter 2). As Richard, in the first play of the tetralogy, appeals anachronistically to a theory of kingship that is essentially Tudor in its emphasis on the sacrosanctity even of tyrannical princes, so Hal cultivates the myth, promulgated by his sixteenth-century chroniclers, of the New Man who, having cast off his unregenerate self, becomes a ‘true louver of the holy Church’ (H5, i.1.23). The Old Song – Falstaff is represented in both parts of Henry IV as an aficionado of the devil’s music – must give way to the New. So successful is Hal’s performance in his new role, and so adept is he in the art of political stage-management, that this doubt-ridden military adventurist is able to