



# The villain as hero in Elizabethan tragedy

*Clarence Valentine Boyer*

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Excerpt from *The Villain as Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy*

This essay, which was presented as a dissertation for the doctorate at Princeton University, is the result of an endeavour to discover whether or not the heroic criminals of Elizabethan tragedy adhered to any particular type. Investigation showed that the greatest villains were Machiavellians. But it did more; it indicated that there were still other types of villains, and that many of them were not only heroic criminals, but were actually the protagonists of the plays in which their crimes were represented. This discovery changed the scope of my work, for it centred my attention upon the problem concerning the nature of tragic emotion, and interested me primarily in Aristotle's theory that tragic pleasure could not be aroused unless the character of the hero were good. As the essay now stands, it is an attempt to trace back to Seneca the origin of plays in which the villain is hero; to differentiate among the various types of villain-heroes presented by the Elizabethan dramatists; to demonstrate the specific influence of Machiavelli upon the type, and to show the gradual breaking away from this influence; and finally to analyse the nature of the emotion aroused by these villain-heroes, and to point out what is necessary to stimulate tragic pleasure when the hero is a villain.

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