



The State of Renaissance Studies II

A WORLD WELL LOST?

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The development of early modern studies over the past half century could be spun as an almost Whiggish tale of progress. We seem to have left behind unhelpful disciplinary divisions; we are alive to the complex identities of our subjects—whether to do with nationhood, gender, sexuality, race, religion, or social class; and we have taken on board the significance of the materiality of texts, whether in manuscript or print, and are all book historians and historians of reading now, at least in part.

This success story is perhaps most apparent in the interaction between the disciplines of history and literature. From pointing, Janus-like, in opposite directions in the later 1980s and 90s, when revisionism and New Historicism respectively reigned supreme, the two have gradually converged—or perhaps become more hybrid—in theme, in method, in approach. Historians are no longer loathe to tackle longer-term transformations, and, in exploring sources of whatever kind, have become conscious of their formal and rhetorical properties and physical format; meanwhile, literary scholars have largely left behind neo-Marxist or Foucauldian master narratives, and instead closely scrutinize the contexts that produced the texts they study, often drawing on up-to-the-minute historical research. In doing so, both are keen to recover contemporary cultures—political and religious, elite and popular, court and civic. The historian Arnold Hunt's beautifully written *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590–1640* (2010) and the literary scholar Richard McCabe's magisterial *“Ungainefull Arte”: Poetry, Patronage, and Print in the Early Modern Era* (2016) effectively epitomize this trend.

Think also of the three components of this journal's name: “English,” “literary,” and “Renaissance.” The once all-pervasive focus on England, frequently accompanied by simple elision of Wales and Ireland, and, after the Jacobean succession, of Scotland, has given way to more fine-grained

distinctions in interdisciplinary accounts of archipelagic history and literature that, as in Christopher Highley's brace of titles, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland* (1997) and *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (2008), are also sensitive to confessional sympathies. The category of "literature" has expanded beyond previously canonical genres and now encompasses sermons and histories and pamphlets and much else. Period descriptors have become at once more flexible and more precise: *ELR*'s website solicits contributions on "Tudor and Stuart" authors which suggests the journal's remit extends from 1485 to 1714, while my instructions for this piece called for reflection on the state of "early modern studies," a designation that for literary scholars usually means 1500–1700, but for historians reaches all the way to the French Revolution. Either way, we no longer draw a firm dividing line at the outbreak of the Civil War, and are more likely to transcend the mid-seventeenth upheaval in search of both continuities and differences. So too we have been more willing to look, as our authors did, across the Channel, to Continental Europe, and further afield, to North Africa, Asia, and the New World.

But is everything as rosy as it seems? Have we not lost something in transit? Consider the study of early modern drama. Older scholars such as Irving Ribner or G. K. Hunter or Geoffrey Bullough or David Bevington or Marie Axton characteristically situated Shakespeare's plays alongside dozens and dozens of those of his contemporaries.¹ They had Latin and sometimes Greek as well as several Continental vernaculars and were able to read Shakespeare's work alongside its foreign sources and analogues. However imperfect their arguments may seem today—no one would countenance Ribner's mechanical reading of the history play—the best of these studies, notably Axton's and Bevington's accounts of the politics of drama, have stood the test of time, especially as they brought before the reader a stunning variety of contemporary dramatic forms and genres, including Inns of Court plays and civic entertainments. It is not that there are no young polymaths and polyglots—Nicholas Hardy, author of *Criticism and Confession: The Bible in the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters* (2017) is one—but they seldom work on the drama.

1. Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, 1957); Hunter, *English Drama, 1586–1642: The Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1997); Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1957–1975); Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London, 1977); Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

Paradoxically, although the availability of electronic resources such as Early English Books Online (EEBO) or Literature Online (LION) ought to have both democratized and diversified the study and teaching of early modern drama, the corpus of authors and plays covered in university syllabuses or discussed in scholarly monographs and edited volumes seems to have contracted. Driven by commercial concerns, academic publishing exploits Shakespeare's iconic status to the point where his writing appears paradigmatic, and that of others rarely gets a look-in. Thus, Oxford University Press's (OUP) recent hefty handbooks of Shakespearian tragedy (2016) and comedy (2018) make little effort to relate his treatment of form to that of his contemporaries.² This would not be a great problem if we had corresponding handbooks of early modern tragedy or comedy but we don't. Nor are there broader-based counterparts to Cambridge University Press (CUP) collections on *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (2009) edited by David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice or *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion* (2015) edited by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore. And while OUP deserves credit for its impressive editorial ventures—first the complete Middleton, and soon Marston and Shirley and Nashe,³ Shakespeare's towering presence now skews the study of early modern drama in a way it did not fifty or even twenty years ago. Neither Ford nor Webster nor even Shakespeare's collaborators Peele or Fletcher has of late earned a monograph of his own.

The profusion of companions and handbooks, moreover, has had the unfortunate effect of fragmenting the sense of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama. Such volumes tend to bring to the fore some of the most familiar texts, as with Manchester University Press's recent *The Genres of Renaissance Tragedy* (2019) which, despite emphasizing "the extraordinary versatility of Renaissance tragedy" in its blurb, features chapters on only one play each, among them such warhorses as *Tamburlaine*, *Sejanus*, *Macbeth*, *Perkin Warbeck*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and *The White Devil*.⁴ CUP's series of edited collections on Middleton, Marlowe and Jonson "in context" too somewhat belies its name, reinforcing the focus on

2. *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearian Tragedy*, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford, 2016); *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearian Comedy*, ed. Heather Anne Hirschfeld (Oxford, 2018).

3. *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2010). The other editions have not yet been advertised.

4. *The Genres of Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Daniel Cadman, Andrew Duxfield, and Lisa Hopkins (Manchester, 2019).

individual authors and for the most part on single plays.⁵ Chapters on the same or similar “contexts” recur across the series—print culture, religion, London, the court—but the writings themselves are rarely compared to those of lesser lights, whether Lodge’s or Greene’s or Peele’s or Dekker’s or Munday’s, never mind Anon’s. Major studies of how the drama engaged with the politics of its time as a rule center on Shakespeare—take, most recently, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power* (2018) or Peter Lake’s *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays* (2016), the latter also seemingly implying that Shakespeare was the first to do so.

It would be good to get beyond the prevalent concentration on Shakespeare and try to regain a more synoptic understanding of contemporary drama. This can be done with reference to excellent recent work on performance and acting companies and playhouses and the City of London and textual transmission, and, above all, Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson’s re-mapping of the whole subject in their multivolume *Catalogue of British Drama, 1530–1642*.⁶

Equally beneficial would be for students of literature to eschew adopting wholesale, and often distorting, paradigms developed by historians. In the earlier to mid-twentieth century, those subscribing to the “pick-lock” or allegorical theory of the politics of literature had sought to deduce one-to-one correspondences between stage characters and historical actors, as did, for example, B. N. de Luna in her *Jonson’s Romish Plot. A Study of Catiline and its Historical Context* (1967). This approach was superseded in the 1980s and 1990s by New Historicist and Cultural Materialist readings which were all about power and subversion and containment. The latest trend has been to appropriate and often misapply Patrick Collinson’s witty term “monarchical republicanism” (sometimes reduced to plain “republicanism,” as in Patrick Cheney’s *Marlowe’s Republican Authorship: Lucan, Liberty, and the Sublime*, [2009]) or the concept of the “post-Reformation public sphere” adapted from Habermas by Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (which Lake himself has now abandoned) or else Lake’s and others’ notion of “popularity,” as in Jeff Doty’s *Shakespeare, Popularity and the Public*

5. *Thomas Middleton in Context* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), ed. Suzanne Gossett; *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge, Eng., 2013); *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. Julie Sanders (Cambridge, Eng., 2014).

6. Wiggins and Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 10 vols. (2011–).

Sphere (2017).⁷ In Doty, as also in *Shakespeare and the Politics of Commoners: Digesting the New Social History* (2017) edited by Chris Fitter, Shakespeare again takes center-stage. The tacit ambition behind such projects is to present him as “progressive” in both his political and social views. In a similar vein, Greenblatt’s Shakespeare emerges as an astute critic of Trump, *avant la lettre*.

It is time to liberate Shakespeare from his not-so-splendid isolation and return to reading his plays and poems as they used to be read, in the company of those by his fellow-authors. But we can—and should—go further. We need to consider Elizabethan and early Stuart drama—its themes, its forms and genres, its politics and ideology—in relation to vernacular drama on the Continent, above all in France, Spain, and the Low Countries. And in this enterprise, we must be guided by everything that has been learned over the past twenty or thirty years, including in the non-Anglophone scholarship, about literary and political culture on both sides of the Channel.

There is a curious disjunction between the study of vernacular and neo-Latin drama in our period. Whereas neo-Latin plays originating in the British Isles and Continental Europe have garnered increasing critical attention thanks to the remarkable blossoming of neo-Latin studies, there has been little attempt to explore from a comparative perspective how, for example, English and French plays of the 1580s and 1590s engaged with the unfolding political and religious crisis—which in France was compounded by the blood-soaked Wars of Religion—or how they staged current affairs at home or abroad, or how they went about dramatizing ancient Rome or contemporary Turkey, or else how they portrayed Old Testament figures and events.⁸ Whereas in France both Catholic and

7. Collinson, “The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester* 69 (1986–1987), 394–424; Lake and Pincus, “Introduction: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England,” in *The Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Lake and Pincus (Manchester, 2007), 1–30; Lake, “The Politics of ‘Popularity’ and the Public Sphere: The ‘Monarchical Republic’ of Elizabeth I Defends Itself,” in Lake and Pincus, 59–94; *Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain: Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell*, ed. Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust, and Peter Lake (Cambridge, Eng., 2002).

8. For French drama’s preoccupation with the traumatic present, see Charlotte Bouteille-Meister, “De l’appel à la révolte protestante à la sortie de crise catholique: les usages de la violence sur les corps dans le théâtre d’actualité en français pendant les guerres de religion,” *Littératures Classiques* 73 (2011), 265–72; “La représentation du régicide dans le théâtre d’actualité au début du XVIIe siècle: entre mise en scène et distance, une stratégie de légitimation monarchique,” *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 32 (2017), 65–79; and *Représenter le présent. Formes et fonctions de “l’actualité” dans le théâtre d’expression française à l’époque des conflits religieux, 1554–1629* (Paris,

Huguenot dramatists offered competing depictions of violent deaths of major figures such as Admiral Coligny or the Duke of Guise or Henry III or Henry IV which were as bloody and Senecan as anything to be found on the Elizabethan stage, in London such raw themes from the nation's recent past were tellingly out of bounds. England may have had Foxe's "Book of Martyrs" but Marian persecutions did not find their way on to the stage until after Elizabeth's death and then in a fairly sanitized form.

This scholarly omission is quite perplexing given how much work has been done on the impact of French political and religious polemic and thought in England—the writings of Louis Le Roy, Innocent Gentillet, Pierre de Belloy, Simon de Goulart, Jean Bodin, Jean Boucher, and so many others, both in the original and translation.⁹ About the only French playwright ever mentioned in studies of Elizabethan drama is Robert Garnier because two of his plays, *Marc Antoine* and *Cornélie*, were translated into English by Mary Sidney and Thomas Kyd respectively. What, though, of the others? Why should our field remain so narrowly Anglo-centric and Anglophone?

The efflorescence of transnational research has been one of the more heartening developments in early modern studies. Until not that long ago, transnational approaches were associated primarily with history of political thought and history of religion—in particular Reformation and Counter-Reformation, history of scholarship and erudition, and neo-Latin studies. Now cross-cultural, multilingual work has come to define the New Diplomatic History, the Archival Turn, and the study of abstract political ideas such as freedom or republicanism, institutions such as representative assemblies, or else practices such as voting.¹⁰ Others have

2019), forthcoming. I am grateful to the author for sharing her work with me in advance of its publication.

9. J. H. M. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1959); Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, *Good News from Fraunce: French Anti-League Propaganda in Late Elizabethan England* (Rochester, 1996).

10. *European Political Thought 1450–1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy*, ed. Howell A. Lloyd, Glenn Burgess, and Simon Hodson (New Haven and London, 2007); *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Eng., 2002); *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2013); *Republicas y republicanismo en la Europa moderna (siglos XVI–XVIII)*, ed. Manuel Herrero Sánchez (Madrid, 2017); *Political Representation: Communities, Ideas and Institutions in Europe (c.1200–c.1690)*, ed. Mario Damen, Jelle Haemers, and Alastair J. Mann (Leiden, 2018); *Political Representation in the Ancien Régime*, ed. Joaquim Albareda and Manuel Herrero Sánchez (London, 2018); *Cultures of Voting in Premodern Europe*, ed. Serena Ferente, Lovro Kunčević, and Miles Pattenden (Routledge, 2017).

charted the European reception of Roman authors such as Tacitus or Lucretius.¹¹

Studies of early modern drama have rather lagged behind, especially in the Anglo-American world: transnational scholarship is not the same as Comparative Literature. The few relevant publications—like those by historians—have typically appeared in edited volumes, some, such as those by Brill, of a mammoth size.¹² And this in turn means that despite often grand claims made in the editorial introduction, the substance of the collection reinforces the impression of national silos (and undue prominence of Shakespeare), as we are offered case study after case study without much genuinely comparative analysis or indication of how and to what end a given phenomenon or theme or genre was deployed by imaginative writers across Europe at any one time.

So how about a temporary moratorium on books about Shakespeare *unless* his work is properly related to that of his contemporaries; on companions and handbooks of various sorts which summarize previous findings; and on edited collections purporting to take a “transnational” approach? Instead, here is to original, erudite monographs on early modern drama that, benefitting from the scholarly advances of the past fifty years, match the scope and breadth of mid-twentieth-century scholarship.

JESUS COLLEGE, OXFORD

11. *Tacite et le tacitisme en Europe à l'époque moderne*, ed. Alexandra Merle and Alicia Oiffer-Bomssel (Paris, 2017); *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, ed. David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, and Philip Hardie (Oxford, 2015).

12. Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, ed., *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theatre* (Aldershot, 2008); Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, ed., *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theatre* (Aldershot, 2014); Jan Bloemendal and Nigel Smith, ed., *Politics and Aesthetics in European Baroque and Classicist Tragedy* (Leiden, 2016).