Lawrence Manley. *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xvi, 603.

This immensely long and highly ambitious work sets out to study the political, economic and social development of London “in relation to the production of literary works” from Thomas More’s *Utopia* in the early sixteenth century to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in the later seventeenth century. “In examining the literary and cultural dimensions of these changes,” Manley distinguishes three periods: the years up to 1550, the first phase of London’s “disruptive emergence from the late medieval landscape”; the years 1550 to 1620 that saw the “re-orientation of London’s markets”; and the years after 1620 when literature was produced “within the framework of a nascent mercantilism, an emerging metropolitanism, and a declining political and religious consensus.” The point is “a mode of historical enquiry more fully theorized — from the socio-economic and literary standpoint — than has commonly been the case in the New Historicism” (pp. 11-13). By theory Manley apparently means a kind of Marxism that combines the interpretations of Maurice Dobb, Paul Sweezy, John Merrington and Perry Anderson, dating from the 1940s to the 1970s, with the more recent work of Robert Brenner. In these works Manley finds evidence for a “systematically *overdetermined* nature of the historical process,” a process in which London plays a key role in the transition from feudalism to capitalism by conditioning the development of an absolute Tudor state, which in turn continued “the power of the feudal aristocracy in a new form,” one in which “the paradoxes of this historically *overdetermined* situation are embodied in the literature of London as fruitful interchanges between courtly and urban modes” (pp. 13-14).

This framework leads to some startling judgments. The reader is told, for example, that the new Tudor state “extended the authority of the feudal aristocracy — increasingly merged with a patrician merchant class — to extract a surplus by legal means” (p. 70), a merger that would have surprised both the Tudor aristocracy and the London merchant class. In fact, feudal and neofeudal are used more or less interchangeably and sometimes in a fashion that defies comprehension: “As in descriptions of London, Where the negotiation of neofeudal compromise through the transhistorical appeal of communal persona and gender yielded finally to a sense of historicized personhood and alienation from the monster city, the ceremonies of London led finally toward innovations . . .” (p. 292).

History is not Manley’s strong suit. For example, in discussing *Cock Lorell’s Bote* (c. 1510) it is argued that the poem “establishes a profound connection between the in-law freedoms of the municipality and the outlaw license of the suburban underworld,” “with London’s unregulated suburban liberties” (p. 81), but in 1510 the liberties were still the sites of monastic establishments — Blackfriars, Greyfriars, the Charterhouse — and as Manley himself recognizes, the poem makes no distinction between the inhabitants of the City and suburbs. In his discussion of the mid-century crisis, Manley states categorically that “for Robert Crowley, as for most of his contemporaries, the

problem was epitomized by London" (p. 96), but then goes on to quote from Crowley's *The Way to Wealth*, in which the evils of rural capitalism — of grazers, enclosers, forestallers, and rack-renters — receive more attention than those of London, not surprising in a work written in the aftermath of the peasant revolts of the previous summer. Later, both Thomas Starkey and Sir Thomas Smith are referred to as court humanists, commenting on the mid-Tudor crisis (p. 107), but whereas Sir Thomas Smith's work dates from the mid-century, Starkey's dates from the 1530s, the decade of Henry VIII's break with Rome. Manley is not, of course, a historian, and it is perhaps unfair to take him to task for factual mistakes and odd historical judgments. Nevertheless, it is surprising to read such peculiar statements as "upon the death of a monarch, the Lord Mayor of London became the highest ranking officer in the kingdom" (p. 29), or the reference to the "lowly" Clothworkers (p. 291), a livery company which was in fact one of the richer of the great Twelve. Or again, that "the economic decline of the provincial towns, like the Reformation itself, was in many ways a manifestation of London's relative advance in political and economic strength" (p. 265), a judgment questionable on both counts, for the declining fortunes of such towns as Coventry reached their nadir in the 1520s before the Reformation, to say nothing of the period of London's spectacular growth, which occurred a generation later. As his footnotes testify, Manley has read extensively in the historical literature, and it is in the light of that reading that these misunderstandings come as a surprise.

Even if the historical framework is questionable both in detail and in general, Manley is surely right in arguing for the increasing rôle of London in the generation of English early modern culture. If one perseveres past the jargon (alterity, semic, liminal, dialogic, transgressive, and the like), past the apparently obligatory references to Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and Jameson, and past such rhetorical excesses as that "London's theatres were, in effect, haunted houses, heterocosmic spaces where rival traditions, values, and generic expectations acted as spectral antagonists, undermining the claims of any play or repertory to represent or interpret society with authoritative force" (p. 437), there are readings of particular works and interpretations of general literary trends that are both challenging and stimulating. One may question whether in More's *Utopia* "expropriation is instated as a natural human norm" (p. 49), or whether in city comedies the basis of human relationships is seen to be "fundamentally exploitative" (p. 439), but such judgments do make one rethink what one thinks one knows about Book II of the *Utopia* or the plays of Dekker or Heywood. And beyond the detailed analysis and insights, there is the challenge represented by such a massive attempt to read so much of the culture of the era from 1500 to 1700 as influenced by, representative of, or responsive to the spectacular growth of metropolitan London. There is surely enough truth in that proposition to send us back to this study, warts and all, for a long time to come.

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