Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Jerzy Limon. *Dangerous Matter: English Drama and Politics in 1623/24*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. vii, 174. \$34.50

Much recent scholarship has felt a need to deck itself out in the disfiguring weeds of "theory" as much, it might be conjectured, from a fear of appearing too nakedly present on the job of examining the text as from elation at dressing in the (late) critical *nouveau chic*. Fashions are fashions—unavoidable maybe, beneficial possibly. But those who ponder this case may also brood over whether too close adherence to the now rather musty teguments of "theory" is safe from risk of infecting the scholarly body proper. Or, to put the matter differently, when scholarship and "theory" come attached is it as body and parasite, like salmon and lamprey? The fish swims on, but not as soundly. So Renaissance studies continue but not always the better for the attentions of "theory," which is apt to seem callow or contrived. This is not to say that Renaissance studies should eschew speculation—quite the contrary.

Dr. Limon has speculated interestingly and, as his title suggests, he does so in the ambience of political intrigue. He has a story to tell which does not disappoint that expectation. The book is handsomely presented in a jacket reproducing the title page of an edition of Middleton's *A Game at Chaess*. His story leads eventually to this play, in order to uncover its political significance and to elucidate a world in which dramatic events and texts from 1623-4, read in ignorance of what Limon calls their "extratextual reality," seem almost devoid of coherence or meaning, but which, when placed in context, are full of significance.

It is a story rendered somewhat tedious, however, by the frequency of piously intoned theoretical-type matter, some of it resembling semiotics, some reader-response, most of it informed with an almost atavistic dread of texts "containing" "meanings," and of authorial "intentions." This concern diverts the author into expending some energy on production of diagrammatic models of communication "applicable to both literature and propaganda" (pp.17-18), which thereafter are simply forgotten or ignored. Limon summarizes: "it may be said that a literary text is capable of functioning as a political piece only in

a communicative process during a particular historical period, within a given society and within the social and political context that a given period creates" (p.19). This lamentable stuff is fortunately forgotten by the author when he is really concerned with his story, and may be dispensed with by the reader. Nevertheless, it is a pity that it occurs, and the more so because, in order to emphasize these and the like banalities, the author finds it necessary to produce gross simplifications of several points of interpretation, and then label them as the "traditional view." It is to be observed that other flaccid expressions ("on-going cold war," "time frame," and the like) are to be found elsewhere in the text, and one fears that Dr. Limon, who acknowledges help given to polish his English, may not have been well-served. In any event, CUP editorial work should have caught these and other infelicities, along with many other errors that have passed the proof-reading.

Is Dr. Limon's work marred a little by theoretist trappings, and the like, or worse? What follows from this stage of the book is the first of the four parts that comprise the body of the book proper. It concerns the masque *Neptune's Triumph*, text by Ben Jonson, interpreted as a commentary on Prince Charles' return from Madrid in 1623 and inspired by the anti-Spanish faction wishing to criticize obliquely and acceptably James I's policies. What Limon especially wants us to see is the significance of James as audience and, in some sense, as subject of the masque. Limon provides an account of the political circumstances—the "extra-textual reality"—through which alone the masque's "meaning" can be grasped. While he is ever so wary about attributing "meaning" to a text, he is curiously untroubled by, even credulous of received political history.

Here, and in the other three sections—which deal respectively with, Thomas Drue's *Life of the Duchess of Suffolk* as a commentary on the Princess Elizabeth's and the Elector Frederick's loss of both the Rhine Palatinate and Bohemia, with Massenger's *The Bondman* as propaganda for Buckingham's war party, and, finally, with Middleton's *A Game at Chesse*—Limon is sedulous to impose a screen of theoretical quibbles about the relationships of reader, audience and text in order, it seems, to pursue a pure form of critical enquiry. He warns against reading "into the text," and other shadowy interpretive solecisms. We are in the presence, he warns, of "a highly controversial issue in criticism" (p. 65). But this fails to emerge, despite repetition. The question seems rather to be by what species of indirection these several dramatic texts make their point. Indeed, in places Dr. Limon's dread of reading into the text seems to encourage him to "read into" the audience political attitudes that are asserted with little critical examination.

Since so much of Dr. Limon's interpretive method depends upon the politics of 1623-24, it is a little disconcerting to note that there is no attempt to distinguish between the attitudes of the historians he relies upon for his account of events. In short, what is missing is any sense that the history is itself an argument, an interpretation, a "controversial issue."

Although anyone might justifiably use the phrase "basic historical facts" at a certain level of exposition, Dr. Limon's account frequently remains at that pitch. It is curious that one of his favourite phrases, "in fact" (so frequent that I ceased to count instances), which may be no more than a quirk of expression, achieves the unwelcome effect of alerting the reader to the presence of unsupported assertions and matters of opinion. These objections made, it must be acknowledged that the author is also capable of telling his story well, as in the lucid account of the Bohemian affair, and in such a way as to illuminate the text he discusses. One could wish for more of it.

Where the interplay of historical reconstruction, dramatic text, and traditional *Quellenforschung* work, the project is vindicated. This is largely the case in the fourth part, "The Matter of Spain," which deals with *A Game at Chess*—the finale of Limon's argument. This play is the most interesting and complex of the extant propaganda in behalf of Buckingham's policies, for reasons which Limon amply explains. Here his taking issue with other scholarly critics is at its most effective, and here he finds real grist for his mill in the divergent views concerning a poem prefacing one of the early editions of the play—a poem that seems to describe "moves" impossible in the actual game of chess. One critic pronounces that "whoever wrote the poem knew nothing of chess" (p. 103). Limon detects here and in the play itself not a Middleton who is simply ignorant of chess, but rather a knowing propagandist who violates "rules" to create an auxiliary level of meaning, one perceptible to those who are clued-in to the political contest between James and Buckingham concerning Spain. Here "autonomous text" and "extra-textual reality" are played to some effect. What Limon goes on to show is that the whole exercise in propaganda contributed to a disaster because it coalesced what were essentially disparate views among Protestant Englishmen concerning England's role in a Providential scheme of history and immediate political strategies. How much this drama brought about political results that would not have otherwise happened is, of course, another question. Limon is able to show the predicament of the censor, Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, who on James' orders moved to suppress it, and from this we may infer that whatever influence the play may or may not have been able to wield, the authorities certainly feared it could. If they had possessed theoretical models of interactional communication, could they have solved the problem any better?

GRAHAM ROEBUCK, *McMaster University*