Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Arthur F. Kinney and Dan S. Collins, editors. *Renaissance Historicism: Selections from English Literary Renaissance*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987. Pp. xv, 411.

Among the current catchy phrases in Renaissance literary criticism is one called "The New Historicism". While this shares some of the techniques and vocabulary of other recent schools (deconstruction, reader response, semiotics), and while it can represent a wide ideological spectrum ranging from American liberalism to British Marxism, it is important to recognize the New Historicism as a movement (it is not exactly a school) separate from those from which its adherents occasionally borrow. If there is a central tenet of New Historicist critics, it is that literary criticism cannot divorce the text from its social and political context: that criticism, in other words, must be a historical as well as a literary exercise. Accordingly, new historicist critics, some of the best of whom are represented in the volume under review, borrow from critics and philosophers (ranging from Marx to Gadamer to Foucault), from a number of political and cultural historians of the early modern period, such as Christopher Hill and Keith Thomas, and from cultural anthropologists including Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz.

Now professional historians, long accustomed to using texts for illustrative purposes rather than pursuing their meaning as an end in itself, may have to fight back a smile at the thought that their brethren in English departments are only just discovering that texts are determined in large measure by their historical situations. Have we not been saying this all along? But it is best not to let the "We told you so" issue with too much of a smirk. There *is* something genuinely new about the new historicism, which makes it more than a rebellion against certain earlier ahistorical schools (most notably New Criticism) and a co-option of others (like deconstruction). And unlike what must now be considered "old" historicism, the historically-based criticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new historicism generally tries to avoid simplistic interpretations in which literary characters are seen only as veiled references to real persons.

The essays in this volume, all previously published in one of the leading journals of new historicism, *English Literary Renaissance*, set a generally high standard. They are most definitely not for the beginner: even Arthur F. Kinney's prefatory

overview of recent critical trends and Jean E. Howard's lengthier survey of the new historicism would be tough nuts for most undergraduate English majors (to say nothing of most historians) to crack. Collectively, they raise a number of issues for consideration, such as the place of texts in society, the use of language to mirror or even create power relationships, and the relationship of literature to other sign-systems, such as ritual.

As Jean E. Howard notes in her opening essay, New Historicism is really an umbrella term for a number of very different criticisms, ranging from Stephen Greenblatt's genuinely historical approach (which has been shared by, for example, Richard Helgerson in America and Martin Butler and David Norbrook in England) to the eclectic works of Jonathan Goldberg, to the complex marxism of English critics such as Jonathan Dollimore. Howard suggests that the Renaissance has become home base for the movement because it is "a boundary or liminal space between two more monolithic periods" (8), the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. I dare say that scholars in those fields might not concur with so static a view of the periods that frame the Renaissance, but it is interesting that in no other era has the New Historicism caught fire so well. That it has done so is in large measure due to the quality and energy of some of its best representatives, especially Stephen Greenblatt, who first coined the phrase.

Louis Adrian Montrose, another highly influential new historicist, offers an essay on the relationship between the Elizabethan pastoral and the nature of power in the late sixteenth century. According to Montrose, the pastoral analogy was employed by the Elizabethan regime to present an image uniting "intimacy and benignity with authoritarianism". The essay is sensible, well-documented, and subtle, but like many of the other selections, it leads one to suspect that literary critics, quite properly eager to find historical authority for their assertions, may not always be as aware as they should be that not all historical authorities carry equal weight. Thus, Montrose hitches his cart to the increasingly discredited argument of P.W. Thomas (first advanced in 1973) that by 1640 there had emerged two distinct and antagonistic cultures, one associated with the court, the other with the country. Few early Stuart historians would now accept this interpretation, at least not without some serious modifications. Thomas' essay is also among the principal supports, much later in the volume, for Laurence Venuti's otherwise persuasive essay on the relationship between Shirley's masque *The Triumph of Peace* and the attempts of first James I and then Charles I to make their gentry subjects return to the countryside instead of idly hanging about in London.

Annabel Patterson's contribution, "Re-opening the Green Cabinet," continues in a pastoral vein with a comparison of the works of Edmund Spenser and one of his French sources, the protestant poet Clément Marot. To Patterson, who takes up here where she left off in her important *Censorship and Interpretation*, pastoral represents less an analogy for the exercise of power than a "language of exile" (for Marot), or a platform for the declaration of contradictory views of England's situation in the 1570s. She contrasts the optimistic vision presented in the April

eclogues of the *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) with the more sombre one issuing from the November eclogue, which contains a veiled critique of the proposed marriage of Elizabeth to the duc d'Alençon. (This would have to be very veiled, if one recalls the fate of one critic, John Stubbs, who together with his printer lost his right hand on the scaffold.) Calendar issues and the character of agrarian life also figure in Peter Stallybrass's very interesting essay on Herrick's *Hesperides*, which suggests ways in which the country elite attempted to "construct carnival as controlled misrule" through deliberate revivals of classical festivals such as the Cotswold Games.

The theme of censorship is a critical one for any discussion of the relationship between writing and power in the Renaissance, as is its obverse, the question of how the poet or dramatist may use his text to provide constructive criticism and advice to authority, to help shape policy without risking the fate of Stubbs, or of his Caroline successor, William Prynne. David Lindley shows how life could not only imitate but revise art in his treatment of Jonson's masque for the marriage of Frances Howard to the earl of Essex, *Hymenaei*: in the 1616 edition of Jonson's *Works*, all specific reference to that event was removed, the bride having subsequently divorced Essex for the Scottish earl of Somerset, and fallen with her new husband in the Overbury murder scandal. In an essay on censorship and the Jacobean stage, Philip J. Finkelpearl persuasively challenges the older view that a ruthlessly efficient censorship mechanism suppressed virtually all expression of political or religious dissent on the stage. Partly due to the temporary anarchy at the Revels Office early in the reign, "violations of nearly unbelievable magnitude" (193) occurred, though no dramatist was ever prosecuted under the libel laws. Finkelpearl relies a little too heavily on non-contemporary works such as Arthur Wilson's biased biography of James I, but his paper is well-balanced and fair to the king.

Martin Butler's essay on the drama of the mid-1630s focuses on how playwrights (including minor ones such as Lodowick Carlell and Henry Glapthorne) dealt with the issue of foreign affairs. Many of these plays, entertainments for the exiled palatine prince, Charles Louis, confront the old question of whether England should stay neutral in the Thirty Years' War or jump in on France's side. Butler's essay is interesting not only for its attention to the minor drama of the period than for his argument, supported by careful scholarship, that Henrietta Maria was, at least before 1637, not the pawn of Rome that many historians have made of her. Similar close attention to the facts characterizes the essay of F.J. Levy (the only historian in the volume) on "Francis Bacon and the Style of Politics", which examines the origins of the first, 1597, edition of Bacon's *Essays* in the context of the overlapping crises of humanism and of politics in the 1590s.

Not all the essays achieve quite the high standard of these. In an essay on the "hegemonic theatre" of George Puttenham, Jonathan V. Crewe insists on reading drama, at least in the context of Puttenham's account of the origins of literary genres, as the instrument of the "ruling class". This begs the question of what exactly that ruling class was, of whom it consisted, and of how it got that way (particularly since

Crewe obfuscates his own argument by referring to the rulers confusingly as a "caste"); so does Crewe's earnest reference to "the intense hostility of the populace to their self-elected rulers" (99), which might surprise even a committed marxist historian like Christopher Hill.

This sort of generalization, though without quite the same level of zeal, is also represented in Anthony Low's paper on the "New Science and the Georgic Revolution in Seventeenth Century England". According to Low, the rise of Baconian and post-Baconian experimental science helped give sweaty agricultural labour (as opposed to blissful pastoral leisure) a prestige it had previously lacked, and did so even before Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* in 1677. This is a fascinating hypothesis, worth further exploration (which it has since received in a book by Low), but what is one to make of broad statements such as that "the decade that seems to have tipped the balance from a basically feudal to a basically modern system of land use was that of the 1650s" (330)? Low's argument is not helped by an over-simple understanding of the character of the "new science" as a monolithic force. As Bacon scholars have long known, and as the final essay in the volume, by Janet E. Halley, demonstrates, there is something fundamentally *incoherent* about seventeenth-century science, at least as it is dealt with by a well-known virtuoso such as Sir Thomas Browne, whose *Garden of Cyrus* represents a kind of middle ground between the "formlessness" of Baconianism and Jan Amos Comenius' projected systematizing.

If some of the papers come close to representing a naive marxist vision of seventeenth-century England, Philip J. Ayres' piece on the nature of Ben Jonson's Roman History Plays threatens to belabour the obvious. Through a lengthy rehearsal of the events of Roman history, and a comparison of historical accounts with Jonson's treatment of them in *Seianus his Fall* and *Catiline his Conspiracy*, Ayres establishes what we already knew, that Jonson was primarily a dramatist, not an historian, without confronting directly the more interesting problem of exactly where and how drama and prose history overlap in the early seventeenth century. Because it is acted out, seen and heard, rather than simply read, drama is the most inviting of genres for critics interested in ritual, and ten of the seventeen papers deal either with the public stage or with the masque, poetry receiving less emphasis and prose writings, including history, less still. On the other hand, most of the authors are careful to link the drama to developments in other genres and in politics. Eugene D. Hill, for instance ties Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* both to the transition between Virgilian and Senecan dramatic styles and to the appearance of anti-Spanish views in non-dramatic writings such as Richard Hakluyt's *Discourse of Western Planting*.

Feminism, too, has its representatives in this volume. By beginning with a documented case of a "skimmington ride", a popular ritual re-enacting and censuring the unsuccessful marriage of a Suffolk husbandman in 1604, Karen Newman anchors her essay on the Renaissance family more firmly than most in the historical record. Focusing on *The Taming of the Shrew*, Newman argues for the occurrence of a "crisis of order" between the sexes, in which women rebelled against the

"master narrative" of patriarchy. Suzanne Gossett examines the treatment of rape in Jacobean drama. She argues that before 1616 the female victims of such assaults invariably died (often at their own hands) out of grief for their besmirched honour, thereby succumbing not just to their attacker but to the patriarchal value system. After 1616, however, the treatment of rape changed radically, even permitting "happy" endings in which the rape itself ceased to be a heinous felony and became little more than a sexual impulse, often resolved by a marriage between rapist and victim. Gossett is on to something here, and it is a pity that she chooses to tie her interesting argument to the tired old cliché of the "decadent" Jacobean court. The question of the "stability" of the relationship between the sexes (which historians and anthropologists have come to realize was more complex than the writings of male contemporaries would have us believe) are among the most exciting issues in this volume, and the essays of Gossett and Newman are rounded off by Mary Beth Rose's examination of the place of apparel in the *Hic Mulier/Haec Vir* controversy of 1620 and its connection with the outstanding early Jacobean example of dramatic transvestism, Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, in which audiences watched a male actor play a woman playing a man.

On balance, this is a useful collection, though not every essay in it will be to everyone's taste – hardly a terrible thing to say about a book. Like much modern literary criticism, its authors attempt to embrace history with some success, while at the same time casting their discussions in a vocabulary that is likely to scare off most historians. This is really too bad. Yet the fact that it is now possible to have such a wide variety of views on Renaissance literature within the same covers is testimony to the extraordinary influence the New Historicism has achieved in a relatively short period of time.

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R. Po-chia Hsia. *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988. Pp. vii, 248.

The Jews, to their frequent dismay, have found themselves at various times in history involuntary actors in a play they neither wrote nor controlled. One of these times was the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Caught up in a web of Christian lay-piety and fundamental changes in the political and social structure of towns and cities, the Jews in German lands were widely suspected by their neighbours of practising the ritual murder of Christian children in order to mock the Christian religion and in order to utilize their blood in a variety of magical rituals. Related to this were suspicions that Jews were wont to desecrate the host as a part of their conspiracy against Christ and the Church.

As Professor Hsia writes in the introduction to this book, it is all too tempting to engage in a refutation of these charges. For though they have been convincingly