A Different Thomas Deloney: *Thomas of Reading* Reconsidered

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Why should readers be asked to reconsider *Thomas of Reading* when this rarely read and discussed Elizabethan novel seldom gets first consideration? The answer is that Deloney's last novel, which was probably written in 1598, offers much to specialists and modern readers alike, with the novel's humour, vitality, and variety all sufficient to recommend it. It is the wide-angled social realism coming from the novel's socio-economic awareness, however, that should prompt us to think differently about both Deloney and *Thomas of Reading*.

The theme of money unifies this novel that some have faulted for not having a central focus. Money touches each of the book's major elements, acting as the principal force in the King's relationship with the clothiers, the social tension caused by the intersection of higher and lower classes, Cole's murder, and the romance between Duke Robert and Margaret.

The characters and plots that Deloney brings together reflect different aspects of Elizabethan society, though the focus is on the middle class. Not surprisingly, critics have examined the middle class that Deloney presents, focusing on Deloney's own background and on the deft characterizations of the tradesmen who populate his work. Deloney's other books, *Jack of Newbury* and the two parts of *The Gentle Craft*, are centred in middle class society, while *Thomas of Reading* examines a somewhat different subject. This causes interpretive problems for some. Merritt Lawlis, for example, finds only idealism in the novel. He writes that "In the end, Deloney is not writing about a real present or a real past so much as an ideal future."¹ And, he continues, if the novel's view is economic, it is also idealistic.² But *Thomas of Reading* is neither a mainstream middle-class novel nor a novel about idealism. Rather, it is a penetrating study of the growing pains experienced by a group of middle-class merchants who have become wealthy. Deloney analyzes rather than celebrates the rise of the middle class in Elizabethan England. His clothiers represent an ascending economic group, and in part the novel details their reaction to social tensions and to power, both economic and political.

Ancillary to Deloney's social analysis are implicit moral judgements that highlight the problem of maintaining virtue in the tough-minded mercantile world of Elizabethan England. Deloney applauds financial success, ambition, and hard work. Yet he does not fully endorse characters unless they are tempered with some moral sense. Deloney condemns truly evil characters, such as Cole's murderers, suggesting as well that ideal ones are not suited adequately for this society. As a result, the interesting characters prove to be those who struggle with virtue and vice.

The King is an example of such an interesting character, and understanding how Deloney treats the deeply-flawed but still appealing king – especially in his relationship with the clothiers – reveals the economic and moral tension that runs throughout the novel. Deloney suggests that to understand the King, we must first recognize the forces that motivate him, giving us an opportunity to distinguish between real and apparent motives during the King's first encounter. Lawlis, blinded by his idealistic interpretation, thinks that the King is witnessing the glorious birth of capitalism when he watches the clothiers' goods pass before him.³ Lawlis suggests that, while the King feels irritated because the passing caravan forces him off the road and keeps him waiting for an hour, he also feels grateful because fate has brought him into contact with a powerful new force: commercial wealth.⁴

This analysis, however, overlooks what is actually happening. When the King sees the clothiers' display of wealth, he does not think of what capitalism and the clothiers can do for the kingdom. Instead, he thinks of what the rich clothiers can do for *him*. A desperate need for self-preservation fuels the King's interest in the clothiers. This opening scene metaphorically displays a king with his political back to the wall. He acts because he is forced to act. But we should not be surprised that the King wants to exploit the clothiers for their wealth and influence. There are other clues to the King's motives in the first chapter. Deloney identifies the King as a usurper needing support, and we also learn that the King will grant favours to those who help him.

The King's involvement with the clothiers proceeds predictably if we recognize that he acts out of private, not public, interests when he calls the clothiers together and explains in the rhetoric of national prosperity that he is willing to grant them anything they want. He grants them a reformation of the currency and the establishment of a standard measurement. Both requests foster greater commercial efficiency and therefore benefit the general population. But at the request of the clothiers the King also institutes the Halifax hanging law, a law that seems regressive because in bypassing the judicial process it advocates the violation of a larger principle: the commitment not to sacrifice the nation's health for the prosperity of a special interest. The hanging law thus symbolizes the King's direct appeal to a special interest.

The King's investment yields dividends quickly, with the clothiers spon-

soring a contingent of soldiers to support the King's attempt to capture Duke Robert, the rightful heir, on the continent. Financial aid to bolster a usurper hardly qualifies as the idealism Lawlis suggests. The clothiers further show their gratitude by honoring the triumphant King when he returns. By doing this, the clothiers wish to remind the King that they helped him secure his arrogated throne. Other rewards follow quickly. The King grants to at least one clothier, Sutton of Salisbury, the favours he requests, and he is so taken with another, Thomas Cole, that he grants him substantial civic authority.

We find it hard to admire the King. His actions stamp him as a cruel and cunning usurper who puts his own interests above the state's. But to his credit, Henry is a strong king who promotes the state's financial well-being, even if it comes as a by-product of his main objective. That Deloney does not turn us away from the King suggests that, in a world where special interest relationships are inevitable and where strong leadership is needed, Deloney is willing to overlook, but not condone, the King's moral imperfections in return for his social and economic contributions.

The aid that the King gives the clothiers secures and enhances their commercial success, but this success carries with it a liability: the social antagonism the clothiers will face because of their wealth. In some ways the tension centres on the country life the clothiers lead and the city life their wealth draws them to. The wives of the clothiers play an important role here, with their demand to wear more expensive clothes bringing this tension to the surface. Simon of Southampton's wife argues succinctly that she and the other wives should be able to dress as well as their London peers: "for I tell you what, quoth she, we are as proper women (in my conceit) as the proudest of them all, as handsome of body, as faire of face, our legs as well made, and our feete as fine: then what reason is there (seeing our husbandes are of as good wealth) but we should be as well maintained?"⁵

Her position stresses the idea that equal income should yield equal benefits. The newly-wealthy clothiers do have as much money as the London merchants, but they resist the trappings of wealth and are reluctant to spend it, especially on fine clothes for their wives. In an important passage, Simon explains to his demanding wife,

Good woman, be content, let vs go according to our place and ability: what will the Bailiffes thinke, if I should prancke thee vp like a Peacocke, and thou in they attire surpass their wiues? they would eyther thinke I were madde, or else that I had more money then I could well vse: consider I pray thee good wife, that such as are in their youth wasters, doe prooue in their age starke beggars . . . why, we are country folkes, and must keep our selues in good compasse: gray russet, and good home-spun cloth doth best become vs."⁶

Simon is concerned that his position in the community will be jeopardized if his wife dresses in a higher style. He hesitates to disturb his comfortable

social milieu because he is reluctant to accept the social consequences of wealth, fearing that the strain envied wealth creates will distance him from his neighbours. This is the crux of the issue. Coming at a strategic place early in the novel, the inn scene involving the inn maids, their husbands, and the clothiers illustrates this tension. The inn maids are attracted to the clothiers, men of wealth and influence, and when their husbands complain about this attraction the inn maids aptly point out that their husbands are jealous only because the clothiers have more money. Understanding this, Simon fears that the lower class's nascent resentment will blossom if his wife parades their wealth. All of this suggests that the clothiers have lost their innocence. Their new social standing and involvement in the King's political and economic manoeuvres have distinguished them. They must now recognize and adjust to the new problems that wealth creates.

Simon's anxiety reflects the complexities associated with wealth and rising social status. In an inverted way, Duke Robert and Margaret encounter difficulties because their disenfranchisement lowers their social status. Each is isolated from society, Margaret because her background and beauty keep her from fitting into the role of domestic servant, Duke Robert because he is his brother's prisoner, though he does have a limited freedom to hunt and move about. Their poverty takes control of their destinies from them. Deloney accentuates their social isolation by idealizing them and making them the only characters in the novel who speak euphuistic language. Their beauty, language, and pure love are all contrasted to the coarser world of *Thomas of Reading*. The king's cruel blinding of Duke Robert dramatizes this conflict. The unhappy ending to Margaret's and Duke Robert's romance is not surprising when we consider that Deloney has suggested that those with ideals are not suited for this society.

While Duke Robert and Margaret represent one extreme of unacceptability, Cole's murderers represent another. The violent, cold-blooded murder of Cole, which commentators often compare with Macbeth's murder of Duncan, is meant to shock us. To make his point Deloney avoids overt moral indignation in favour of letting the repulsive act speak for itself. His crisp, detailed account of the murder is chilling. The hostess and host of Colebrook murder for money, and that they cannot make ends meet after sixty such killings demonstrates their prodigality. The message of this tale rings clear. Greed has overtaken Cole's murderers and enslaved them; their evil acts are the inevitable consequence.

Some of the clothiers share the vice of prodigality, though they are distinct from Cole's murderers because in them it is a minor flaw, not a dominant characteristic. Deloney presents the clothiers as those best suited for this new world of capitalism. They are hard-working and mainly virtuous (their charity toward Tom Dove shows this), but nevertheless Deloney chastises them when their vices gain temporary control. Cutbert's experi-

ence with Old Bosom's wife serves as an example. We first side with the adulterous Cutbert and Bosom's young wife, as any woman who must endure Bosom deserves our sympathy. But to make his moral position clear, Deloney shifts our sympathy to Bosom, who now appears more sinned against.

The theme of prodigality and Deloney's response to the weaknesses of the clothiers frame the subplot involving the financially irresponsible Tom Dove and his unhappy servants. To make this subplot more important, Deloney weaves into it the theme of economic self-interest. We have seen examples of this theme already, and in each case we are led to feel sympathy for those who actively seek to better themselves. Deloney, for example, makes the usurping King more attractive by contrasting his political sophistication with Duke Robert's ineffectualness. The contrast is between active strength and passive weakness. And while we admire the successful clothiers, we have at least equal regard for their wives because they aggressively seek to secure what they feel belongs to them, using an argument that appeals to our sense of justice.

Tom Dove's servants also want to control their financial destinies and seek to strike out on their own now that Dove has squandered his money and can no longer support them. But the issues are complex for Deloney. He tries hard to gain sympathy for Dove by characterizing him as affable and by branding the servants as wicked, yet the appeal of economic self-interest proves too great for Deloney and he unwittingly makes the servants attractive figures. The proof of this lies in their complaints against Dove – they are entirely reasonable. Deloney sets up Dove as a kind of representative of an older tradition that places great value on the allegiance between master and servant, but in a changing world where economic self-interest is applauded, we are drawn to the servants. The cogency of their argument appears in the remarks of one of them:

And what of all this? . . . because you tooke vs vp poore, doth it therefore follow, that wee must bee your slaues? We are young men, and for our partes, we are no further to regard your profit, then it may stand with our preferment: Why should we lose our benefit, to pleasure you? If you taught vs our trade, and brought vs vp from boyes to men, you had our seruice for it, whereby you made no small benefit, if you had as well vsed it, as we got it. But if you be poore, you may thanke your selfe, being a iust scourge for your prodigalitie, and it is my opinion plaine, that to stay with you, is the next way to make vs like you, neither able to help our selues, nor our friends, therefore in brieft, come pay me my ages, for I will not stay. . . .⁷

The future belongs to those who embrace these principles. Deloney has continually displayed the new dynamic forces in his world, but even he does not realize how powerful these new ideas are.

The many different applications of the theme of money in *Thomas of Reading* give us a different understanding of Deloney's view of Elizabethan society. Previous critics have credited Deloney with a kind of hindsight that glosses over or ignores the more complex issues involved. But Deloney's treatment of the clothiers, both in their relationship of special interest with the King and in the social tensions they experience because of their elevated social status, shows that he is an Elizabethan writing about a changing society that is notable for its pressures, tensions, and changing values. Lawlis is right, however, to respond to the novel's idealism. Yet the significance of *Thomas of Reading* is that these value judgments are almost always controlled by, and even sacrificed to, Deloney's penetrating social analysis. Ideals must be judged in relation to the broader view of the mercantile world. Thus the clothiers are held up for emulation. They have both virtue and a keen business sense.

Deloney's view of Elizabethan society is not based on hindsight that glorifies social evolution. Instead, his is a contemporary vision characterized by realism. For too long critics have isolated Deloney's successes with characterization and dialogue and plugged these elements into a theory for the development of modern realism. If we can look past the consequences of Deloney's isolated triumphs, we can see that his realism is more embracing. In *Thomas of Reading*, Deloney is an Elizabethan looking at Elizabethan society with penetrating Elizabethan eyes.

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Notes

- 1 Merritt Lawlis, Introduction to *Thomas of Reading* in *Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, Merritt Lawlis, ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1967), p. 550.
- 2 Lawlis, Introduction, p. 548.
- 3 Lawlis, *Apology for the Middle Class* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 57.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Thomas Deloney, *Thomas of Reading*, in *The Novels of Thomas Deloney*, Merritt Lawlis, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), pp. 299-300.
- 6 Deloney, p. 300.
- 7 Deloney, p. 338.