
The rationale for Cambridge University Press's new Renaissance series, of which this is the first volume, is that 'The last twenty years have seen a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political and cultural history'.

Bruster's book fits emphatically with the new policy, as on the whole it argues that we have to see Renaissance drama from a materialist perspective, one that, although never quite described as such, owes much to Marx. The 'market' of the title is not particularly the market for the plays, but a more nebulous concept of commercialism which sees Renaissance society, and individuals within it, as conditioned by the dawn of 'institutionalized capitalism'.

That the sixteenth century did witness what is often called the 'rise' of capitalism in England is perhaps generally accepted, although there is at present a frequent tendency to underestimate the continued presence of feudalism in England as distinct from its almost complete disappearance in a truly mercantile society like that of Holland. What, in any case, matters from a literary/theatrical point of view is how helpful it is to view individual plays from this perspective.

In this regard, one disconcerting aspect of Bruster's treatise is that he tends to shift his view from one theoretical viewpoint to another. His dominant belief appears to be that the plays are the product of an 'economic system' (p. 117) that, nevertheless, both he and the dramatists view with disapproval. Thus Wilson Knight's view of Tintom of Athens as a play that 'condemns no system, but rather men as individuals' is modified by reference to the influence of the new market economy, which 'apparently distorts human relationships'. Yet, on the same page, Troilus and Cressida is held to answer Marx's question 'is Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented? And is the Iliad possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist?' by 'showing us that Achilles and the Iliad are all about just such inventions, about the passing of the old and the coming of the new, that Troy's fall is about change'. In other words, Shakespeare can see things in a timeless, non-materialist way, even if his vision enables him to detect a material change in another epoch.

The materialist emphasis, in my opinion, operates with more success in some cases than in others. It is often illuminating when Bruster reads Ben Jonson, who, it may be admitted, was both intensely worried by mercantile attitudes and caught up in them. Malvolio is usefully analysed (on p. 79) as someone whose misreading of what he takes to be Olivia's letter is inspired by commercialism. There is, I agree, no doubt that Malvolio wishes to promote himself by marrying his social superior, and it makes sense to see his imaginary additions to the letter (Olivia's 'c's, her u's, and her t's', and 'M 0 A I') as the product of a mind seeking material advancement—something evident also in his view of 'the physical luxury of the "branch'd velvet gown," winding up his new watch and playing with "some rich jewel"'.

But I think Bruster is mistaken in seeing this 'Shakespearean moment' as 'similar' to the "shoe" passage in Dekker's Shoemaker's Holiday. He refers (p. 77) to the presentation of a pair of shoes by Ralph, a journeyman shoemaker, to Jane, his wife. Ralph and his fellow craftsmen fashion these shoes especially for her, and he gives them to her with the words:

    Thou know'st our trade makes rings for women's heels:
    Here, take this pair of shoes cut out by Hodge,
    Stitched by my fellow Firk, seamed by myself;
    Made up and pinned with letters for thy name.


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REVIEWS

To me, and I think to most people who have no ideological axes to grind, the action of Ralph and his fellows demonstrates a touching regard for Jane. There may be an element of pride in his words, but nothing, surely, to justify Bruster's description of the lines as embodying 'the male construction of female identity' which 'here depends on violent building of the woman'. I see no evidence that either Dekker or Ralph and his men regard the making of shoes as establishing Jane's identity, leave alone that the process is 'violent'. In a case like this, one feels uncomfortably that the lines—and the whole dramatic situation—are wrenched to fit a preconceived thesis rather than that they are approached receptively. Bruster does not seem sufficiently aware of the possibility that authors differ, or that even one and the same author may differ from one moment to another. Too often, he views the plays of the period as a 'collective' effort, unavoidably destined to take its place in the materialist scheme of things.

To express these serious reservations is not to deny that the book contains a good deal of value. It is, for one thing, very learned. The bibliography lists some 300 items, and the author shows throughout that he is thoroughly familiar with much writing on the Renaissance, and, through it, with much of what happened and was thought in the period. For a writer so interested in the physicality of Renaissance life, Bruster seems curiously distant from, for example, documents of the period, unlike, say, Andrew Gurr, whose work on theatrical matters he rightly respects. But his grasp of the writings of other scholars is none the less impressive and instructive. And the materialist approach does get used to advantage in, especially, a lengthy and illuminating reading of Troilus and Cressida (Chapter 7), although even in this instance I remain uncertain whether it really is the method which produces satisfactory results or that it so happens that any good reader might have arrived at similar conclusions because of the nature of the play. But, whatever the answer to that question, one is grateful for the chapter.

There are a few inaccuracies, such as the attribution of The Honest Whore to Heywood instead of Dekker (p. 32; but not on p. 56), inconsistent spelling of Alexander Leggatt's name (incorrectly spelled on p. 32 and p. 162), 'insistence' (p. 26), etc., but on the whole my dissatisfaction, where I feel it, results from Bruster's interpretation of facts rather than his presentation of them. And it must be added fairly and squarely that my reservations about the book's preoccupation with materialism could just as readily be expressed in relation to a great many other books published in recent years. Bruster's work is very competent within its tradition, and those who are happy with that tradition may well like his book more than I do. Ultimately, however, my concern is not with Bruster's ideological view of the Renaissance per se, but whether or not he persuades me that his view of the plays is compatible with what they appear to say. In this he succeeds in part.

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Shakespeare's Mouldy Tales: Recurrent Plot Motifs in Shakespearian Drama.


Northrop Frye's A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance (Columbia University Press, 1965) began with a chapter called 'Mouldy Tales' in which Frye distinguished between 'Iliad critics', whose 'interest in literature tends to centre . . . in the area of tragedy, realism and irony', and 'Odyssey critics', whose interest centres in the area of 'comedy and romance'. Leah Scragg, like Frye, would seem to be an Odyssey critic. But, whereas Frye's journey round the 'mouldy' motifs which are conventionalized in Shakespeare's plays led him back to relationships between drama, myth, and ritual and forwards into the structural


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