

WILLIAM LEAHY AND NINA TAUNTON

Introduction

The practice of studying Renaissance texts has, in the last few years, entered a new phase in its history, one which no longer requires a catchy moniker, but can simply describe itself as Renaissance studies. Scholars of the period no longer describe themselves as New Historicist or Cultural Materialist critics, or indeed, as anti-historicist or anti-materialist, but rather, in their work, demonstrate their immersion in historical research and/or critical theory. The enormous influence wielded by a number of scholars who aligned themselves to one or other of these “schools” of criticism has waned over time, and those interested in the Renaissance period are now able to conduct their research free from the anxiety that their work will not be given its due consideration because of its perceived ideological trajectory. This is, surely, a positive development.

The healthy state in which Renaissance studies currently finds itself is due to a number of complex reasons; the shedding of a constrictive moniker, and the discarding of the need for a “post” appellation are among the most important. It seems that not only has the designation “New Historicism” been put to bed, but so has its immediate heir, “post-(new) historicism.” We therefore do not find ourselves in a position of having to find a way out of the confining parameters set by historicism and

materialism, but can merely get on with the practice of trying to understand and explain our given area of interest to the best of our ability. As such, we are in a position to say “this is what I do,” rather than “this is where I stand.”

This is, of course, not to dismiss the important methodological strategies that both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism provided and refined. Renaissance studies as a whole has taken good practice from these approaches and uses them as a basis for current analysis. The necessity for close and thorough historical contextualisation—based on clear and focused research—is the foundation of the best of contemporary work, as is a more modest approach to the potential effects and importance of any text in its moment of production. One very rarely sees the kinds of conclusions reached in the moment of “high-historicism,” where all sorts of extraordinary claims were made regarding the cultural significance of particular texts and/or authors. The emphasis now, it is clear, is on not on proclamation but on recovery and understanding.

Related to this development is the turn to previously marginal early modern writings. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism were notoriously Shakespeare-centred, and when other authors were considered, criticism tended to be focused on canonical texts. Specific central texts were analysed by these schools, and overarching ideological implications drawn from these analyses. More contemporary criticism, as the essays in this collection amply demonstrate, work in the opposite direction, in the sense that a number of varying and, to a greater or lesser extent, marginal texts are examined, and more moderate, more realistic conclusions drawn. A good example is the first essay in this current collection, in which Darryll Grantley examines a neglected mid-sixteenth-century interlude for boys, *July and Julian*. Grantley furnishes the first ever, critical consideration of this play as herald to a full-

length study on the Tudor Interlude. He looks at this particular interlude in respect of the challenge Roman Comedy conventions present to notions of authority and class. Grantley notes that the subversive agenda of the play goes beyond that of Roman comedy itself, there being no mitigation of the trenchant attacks on the oppressiveness of authority in various forms, sometimes including that of schoolmasters. This is all the more remarkable in what is clearly a school interlude. While this consideration of such a marginal text demonstrates the broadening of subject matter deemed suitable for academic research in Renaissance studies, Grantley also refuses to draw all-encompassing implications from the text, arguing more modestly that, though crudely written, this play deserves more attention both for its formal features and its value as a document of social history.

The negotiation of Roman generic constraints is also central to Stephen Clucas's essay on Elizabethan Ovidianism, in which he examines the perceived rise of a new "metamorphic aesthetic" in painting and literature, associated with Ovidian themes. By surveying a range of late sixteenth-century English literature, including works by Stephen Batman, Arthur Golding, Thomas Lodge, John Marston and George Chapman, Clucas suggests that the idea of an "Ovidian renaissance" which used metamorphosis to represent "a permanence of sex, dream and the golden imaginary world of myth" was troubling in a climate of English Protestantism. The internalisation of anxieties surrounding pagan eroticism was, according to Clucas, a significant shaping influence on English Ovidianism. He argues that the evasive and oblique metamorphic strategies used by writers such as Batman, Golding, Marston, Chapman and Lodge are informed by an unresolved vacillation in which eroticism is seen as a "blest infection," in which desire and abjection are inseparably intermixed.

Both religion and the writing of Thomas Lodge are central concerns for Robert Maslen, whose essay links Lodge's poem *Glaucus and Scilla* (1589) with the poet's lifelong interest in satire. According to Maslen, this interest stemmed from Lodge's sense of alienation from the English establishment, an alienation marked by his conversion to Catholicism, as well as by the suppression of his first published work. Maslen persuades us that this disaffection found a voice in Lodge's account of Scilla's estrangement from human form and consequent silencing. This in turn gave a powerful new poetic voice to the various forms of discontent being harboured in the hearts of educated young Elizabethans. In the following decade, Maslen argues, the erotic narrative poem became one of the wittiest and most popular means of satirising certain aspects of contemporary culture available to disgruntled writers.

This theme is picked up in Cliff Forshaw's paper, which examines the 1599 Bishop's ban on satire. The ban exposes the potential danger of satire as a genre, and Forshaw demonstrates how ineffective this censorship was, since the provisions against verse satire were policed in a very different way from the state's usual acts of censorship. He examines the reasons why formal verse satire based on classical models for a sophisticated and largely Inns of Court and university audience should have been included in a ban whose main thrust appears to have been the censorship of seditious matter in popular stage and pamphlet literature. This essay suggests that the bishops' misunderstanding of satirical "Aretinian" rhetoric led them to conjecture the potential for sedition where none was intended. Forshaw shows how the ban was circumvented, by examining the careers of the verse satirist John Weever and his printer Valentine Simmes. This examination exposes the unintended effects of the prohibition; far from ending verse satire, it inadvertently gave a new lease of life to an already flagging genre.

The debt to the methodologies of the New Historicism is clear in many of the essays in this collection, where the immersion of the literary objects of interest in the context of other social practices is regarded as both necessary and unproblematic. The crossing of boundaries which mark out previously discrete disciplines is no longer questioned; it has become an appropriate—indeed, an essential—practice. Such a methodology is clear in William Leahy’s consideration of Renaissance representations of the “difficult” figure of Anne Boleyn. Leahy argues that Shakespeare’s portrayal of Boleyn in *King Henry VIII* has traditionally been regarded as one that does not take account of her ambiguous historical position, and he goes on to examine this portrayal in the light of her own coronation procession, as well as her representation in the coronation procession of her daughter, Elizabeth. These representations of Boleyn are then set against the famous letter written by Sir Henry Wotton to describe the burning down of the Globe Theatre during a production of *King Henry VIII* in 1613. Set within such a context, Leahy argues that the representation of Anne in the play is not what it has traditionally been made out to be, but demonstrates the difficulties inherent in staging such a problematic figure.

Such cross-disciplinary work is evident in Anthony Bromham’s essay, which examines connections between Bronzino’s painting, *Allegory of Venus with Cupid*, and Middleton’s tragedy, *Women Beware Women*. Bromham argues that the painting is concerned with the matter of syphilis and the motif of the contaminating Venus. The paper examines how Bianca is presented as a court Venus in the play, and the Duke is associated with Cupid, but a Cupid from an early iconographic tradition which presented the love god not as cherubic or handsome but as sharing characteristics with the devil. References from the play suggest that the audience is made to focus on the subject of venereal infection. Bromham demonstrates how the

connection between the play and the painting shows artists in different fields treating common subject matter and using corresponding techniques.

Lloyd Davis's essay on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* similarly prioritises gender issues, showing how the play is preoccupied with notions of masculinity and male identity. Davis examines how the play stages the destructive conflicts between various male figures and their discursive struggle to define gender and political ideals. Rather than considering the play merely in its moment of cultural production, the essay then turns to contemplate how critical debates in the Restoration and eighteenth century over the quality of Shakespeare's representation of male figures reveal the importance of the play's depiction of gender for notions of history and cultural politics. Ultimately Shakespeare's play and its critical tradition are seen to be unable to conceive of a society not grounded on ideal masculinity, even though that ideal is celebrated largely through violence and death. In this light, Davis argues, *Julius Caesar* stages the potent capacity of culturally dominant masculinity to recreate and perpetuate itself.

Davis's spotlight on the ways in which literary representations are transmitted through time is also Alan Stewart's subject. "The Birth of a National Biography" provides new insights into the role of biography in complex formations of cultural identity. Stewart's focus is on an article written by S. L. Lee, entitled "The Original of Shylock," published in February 1880 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. In this article, Lee claimed that Shakespeare had based his character Shylock to some degree on the real-life Portuguese Jewish physician Dr Lopez, who was tried and executed in 1594 for conspiring to poison Queen Elizabeth. Lee used the article to forward a more general claim that there had been a Jewish presence in England in the sixteenth century, a claim that ran counter to standard historiography of the day. At the same

time as he identified this Jewish past, however, he disguised his own Jewish identity by changing his name from Solomon Lazarus Levi to “S. L. Lee.” In later life, Sidney Lee became a major man of letters, whose achievements included succeeding Leslie Stephen as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Historians have seen his life as assimilationist, and argued that he did not pursue Jewish concerns and themes in his work. However, Stewart argues that as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Lee’s vision of ‘national biography’ was importantly an inclusive one that would be “prepared to satisfy the commemorative instinct of all sections of a nation.” This led to a policy that revised British history by including nonconformist minorities, including Jews. The paper ends by questioning why, in pursuing this goal, Lee read the affair of Dr Lopez as motivated by anti-Semitism—and deliberately misrepresented archival evidence to forward his case. It suggests tentatively that, writing in late 1879, Lee was responding to news of the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany, and that both his immediate and long-term projects may be more fruitfully understood as part of a subtle response to the new perception of that phenomenon.

In many ways the essay by Kathryn Perry is indicative of the (positive) state in which Renaissance studies finds itself today, concentrating as she does on the commercial imperatives faced by early seventeenth-century printers as well as the types of literature they produced. Perry assesses five little-known collections of epigrams, mostly published in the 1610s, as commodities presented on London booksellers’ stalls, marketed by their title-pages, prefatory material and a browse of their contents. It looks at the physical form and material existence of these and other collections of epigrams, at the way in which they are sites on which contests between author, printer, and stationer are played out, and at the ways in which authors construct fictions of socially and intellectually desirable readers. These

epigrammatists do not spurn print and the print marketplace, but they are anxious about the commercial transaction between bookseller and buyer, and do try to ward off the wrong kind of readers, along with the “vile arts” of publicity. The five collections of epigrams share an interest in animal personae and animal metaphors fore-grounded in their title pages and prefatory material. Like the tensions between the elite and the popular manifested in printed collections of epigrams in general, animal references at this date oscillate between associations with the sophisticated and politically daring satire of Spenser’s *Mother Hubberds Tale*, and popular entertainment and instruction. In some instances, the author is clearly the source of the animal references; in others, it seems that they have been foisted upon him by the printer or stationer. By foregrounding animals, these epigrammatists add to the risks inherent in their tightrope walk between literary aspiration in a commercial environment, and endorsement by the social elite to which they believe they belong.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism encouraged scholars to reflect upon their own critical practice and the implications of that practice. The final essay in this collection pushes this reflexive process even further forward, into what is in effect a theorisation of the practical problems of editorship. In “Modernising Scottish Witchcraft Texts,” Lawrence Normand uses his experience to reflect upon the editorial quandaries residing in texts produced during and following the North Berwick witch-hunt of 1590-91, when a group of witches supposedly conspired treasonable witchcraft against King James VI and his newly-wed Danish princess Anne. The process of turning sixteenth-century texts into twenty-first-century printed books that can be readily understood by present-day readers is, according to Normand, one that is fraught with the possibilities of error, distortion and falsification. While an editor’s aim is ideally to present early modern texts in an

authentic way, the editing process shows the impossibility of achieving that. The postmodern idea that literary editors now readily embrace is that an edition of, say, a Renaissance play is one more instance of the play's reproduction in history which has several forms: theatrical production, critical discussion, canonical location, reproduction in film or television. But that idea is not one that is embraced by historians when they seek to edit historical documents for the modern reader. Historical documents are deemed to be significant and useful to the modern reader in trying to understand the past inasmuch as they still carry upon them the signs of their initial production and context. Literary texts, on the other hand, are usually reproduced in new editions with blithe disregard for their original material form. Normand's essay highlights the challenges of editing sixteenth-century texts and marshals the author's editorial experience to formulate a theory of editorship. The texts have value primarily as historical documents yet they range in genre from the non-literary to the literary, and so would seem to demand a different set of priorities in their editing. After these, and other, editing processes have been applied to this varied set of texts, Normand ponders the theoretical questions that arise concerning the aim of presenting early modern texts in an authentic way, and the nature of edited text that emerges from this process.

In many ways the essays which comprise this special edition of *EnterText* are proof that the Renaissance has been, to a great extent, already critically renegotiated. Each in its own way is representative of the current state of the discipline and, as a whole, they push Renaissance studies in directions which, though heterogeneous, are coherent and cohesive. While one would not want to claim that the discipline is, or should be, at peace with itself, this collection shows that the ideological tensions of the past have, more or less, been put to one side, and Renaissance scholars can now

research and write in an atmosphere of intellectual interest rather than dogmatic positioning.

William J. Leahy
Nina Taunton

April 2003