

**Andy Kesson. 2014**  
***John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship***  
**Manchester: Manchester University Press**

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In his Introduction, Andy Kesson writes, “In 1632, Edward Blount published six of Lyly’s plays, naming the writer, on the title page, ‘the onely Rare Poet of that Time, The Witie, Comically, Facetiously-Quicke and unparalleledd’” (3). It is on the basis of contemporary verdicts such as Blount’s, but also Thomas Lodge’s, Francis Mere’s and Ben Jonson’s, that Kesson proposes a reappraisal of Lyly “using evidence for his unparalleled success and influence to rethink his role as the major literary figure of his age” and “oppos[ing] itself to a conventional critical view of Lyly that sees him as hopelessly irrelevant, pretentious and effete” (10). In this sense, Kesson’s work aspires to overthrow G. K. Hunter’s seminal *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (1962), which has presided Lyly studies patriarchally for the last half-century, and to reinstate Lyly’s “often dissident and disruptive work” (11) for readers and theatre-goers of the twenty-first century. Indeed, thanks to the good offices of Manchester University Press in making available reliable texts of Lyly’s works over the last twenty-five years and, in particular, to Leah Scragg’s careful unpicking of received wisdom, Lyly is making something of a comeback in university programmes and the theatre; and Kesson himself has been instrumental in this revival, acting as consultant to recent stagings. His book is an attempt to explain why Lyly’s star shone so bright among his contemporaries, waned so fast thereafter, and deserves rekindling today. Drawing on recent studies of the Elizabethan book trade (Halasz 1997, Raven 2007, Squires 2007, Voss 1998), Kesson locates Lyly at the intersection of theatre and printing and makes him the linchpin of the newly emerging market for “printed single-story fiction and printed drama” (19).

The book is divided into three parts. Parts I and II consider Lyly's prose fiction and drama in turn, each devoting a first chapter accounting for Lyly's originality and a second to his impact on the corresponding market (single-story books and printed plays, respectively). The third part traces the history of Lyly's reception in a single chapter.

As for the prose fiction, Kesson notes Lyly's interest in storytelling and plotting, *pace* Hunter (1962:21) and Peter Saccio (1969:31), before questioning the conventional assumption that Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) was a hit on account either of its style, or of its main character, or both. Kesson's point is that the book's initial success "depended on an unprecedented number and range of bookshop customers choosing this new edition in December 1578 and early 1579" (38), before, that is, the style and the hero could have become well-enough known to act as selling points in a marketing campaign. On the basis of *Anatomy's* title-page, Kesson supposes that in contrast to the prose fiction miscellanies of George Painter (*Palace of Pleasure*, 1566), George Pettie (*A Petite Pallace of Pettie His Pleasure*, 1566-1567), Geoffrey Fenton (*Certaine Tragicall Discourses of Bandello*, 1567) and George Gascoigne (*Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*, 1573), Lyly's book appealed to those browsing the counters in Paul's churchyard because it offered a single-story about one person while also "exploiting the current vogue for anatomical spectacle, using the exotic unfamiliarity of the Greek name Euphues, and promoting the book as a dictionary of wit" (48). What Kesson does not explain convincingly is why Lyly and/or his publisher Gabriel Cawood should know that those characteristics would sell: his close attention to the paratextual blinkers his vision of the larger contextual picture. The reader is therefore left to surmise that, perhaps, single protagonists with erudite names would attract an expanding educated middle-class readership avid for quality fictions about upwardly mobile "bourgeois heroism" (Stevenson 1984:6). One also wonders whether title-pages were the only means of marketing new books. Much as the "printing community" was "especially small" (42), so too was the reading and writing community, many of whose members were berthed in the Inns of Court and in daily contact in the lobbies of Whitehall. Networking was inevitable, grapevines took easy root, and Lyly's forthcoming book would have been a topic of general conversation.

Kesson is on securer ground when dealing with the impact of Euphues on the book market and literary production. After dismissing conventional accounts of a fall from favour (Hunter 1962, Guenther 2002, Wilson 2008) and a Lyly-euphuism fad (17 editions of prose works and plays between 1578 and 1583) consigned to the “ante-room” of Elizabethan literature by “the midday sun” of Shakespeare (Dover Wilson 1905:3, 138-39), Kesson documents how Lyly was continually published in an “unprecedented” (73) number of editions from the 1590s to 1636. Accordingly, Kesson claims that “Lyly’s popularity created new forms of literature and permitted new kinds of authorial careers and reading experiences” (73), with Paul’s churchyard and the book trade acting as the central hub and rivalling the court as prime cultural arbiter. After suggesting that Euphues is the first prose fiction character to transmute from allegorical figure to psychological realism (77) and presenting Lyly as a philosophical sceptic whose revelling in ambiguity and multiplicity of perspectives created a new, inventive reader, Kesson guides us through Euphues’ afterlives in Anthony Munday’s *Zelauto* (1580), Barnabe Riche’s *Don Simonides* (1581, 1584), Robert Green’s *Mamillia* (1583), Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalind: Euphues Golden Legacie* (1590) and John Dickenson’s *Arisbas: Euphues Amidst His Slumbers* (1594). The upshot is that Lyly “demonstrated new terms and modes of authorship” and that he was “fundamental to constructing paradigms of print storytelling that continued into seventeenth-century pamphlet and novelistic traditions” (96-97).

Turning to the plays, Kesson notes that it is difficult now to fully realize how innovative they are since so few plays from other authors survive from the 1580s. Nonetheless, he proposes that their impact was huge on account of the way they addressed their audiences (what literary pragmatists might call their addressivity), their “performative rhetoric and the establishment of character and fictional worlds” (105); in addition, the plays manifest the same, radical indeterminacy of the prose fiction, a ruse which, by empowering the audience to determine significance, makes it responsible for that significance and exonerates the writer of any commitment to whatever that significance may be. Making his own William West’s judgement that Lyly was the first English playwright to express “the theatre’s indeterminacy” through the “uncertainty [he] built in to performance” (West 2002:121), Kesson implies a refashioning of Lyly in the image of that Shakespeare and those men

of achievement celebrated by John Keats (1954:53) as being “capable of being in uncertainties.” Otherwise, Kesson shows how Lyly’s prose style was able to create space and embedded the kinesics his plays are often accused of lacking, while together with his dramaturgy it helped him “define character by movement, language and effect upon other people in the play” (122). In the process, he invented the humour play (*The Woman in the Moon*), metamorphosed early modern love (*Love’s Metamorphosis*), exploited metatheatrical references and “discover[ed] ways of representing spontaneous thought on stage” (127).

Before analysing Lyly’s impact on the market for printed plays, Kesson provides a useful *mis en scène* depicting current disagreement regarding whether printed plays were automatic moneyspinners or risky business ventures, but consensus regarding the boom in printed plays post-1594, which has been tentatively explained as a ploy to market the reopening of theatres after the plague (Stern 2007:139) or the reorganisation of theatrical companies into the Admiral’s Men and the Chamberlain’s Men (Gurr 2004). Kesson believes that Lyly – conventionally sidelined in Shakespeare-oriented relevant research – was behind this sudden glut, arguing that the plays could be marketed as coming from the same pen as Euphues. That being so, Lyly becomes crucial to the development of the author figure and its potential for commercial exploitation. Certainly, “Lyly was the first Elizabethan writer to see a succession of his plays into print, and the first English writer to see his plays reprinted in a single year” (145), evidence that undermines the standard view that it was the popularity of Shakespeare’s plays which led to the establishment of the playbook market on the back of the prose fiction market, which Lyly had also been instrumental in instituting. Moreover, Lyly seems to have preceded Ben Jonson in the meticulous preparation of playtexts for publication.

The assertion of Lyly’s primacy on numerous heads and the increasingly frequent invocations of Shakespeare prepare us for the final chapter on Lyly’s reception in which Kesson traces a lengthy downward trajectory mirroring almost exactly Shakespeare’s equal and opposite ascent. That reception is in fact not of Lyly but of euphuism, a term which both Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe used, not necessarily in connection with Lyly and certainly not in relation to Lyly’s characteristic (but by no means unique) style. The

problem, according to Kesson, began with Edward Blount's preface to his 1632 edition of Lyly's works, in which he praised an innovative literary style, favoured by the ladies and as foreign but desirable as French. After the pernicious effects of a French Catholic queen and the Civil War, such a style was never likely to remain in favour as the search commenced for "solidly, reassuringly English and masculine literary archetypes" (183). Eighteenth-century misogyny and Francophobia sealed Lyly's fate as Shakespeare's political *caché* rose. Thenceforth, the fall from "corrupt prose stylist" (190) to corrupting bearer of "the English disease" was brought about by the misapprehensions and/or misrepresentations transmitted through the nineteenth century from Walter Scott at the beginning to suspicions of unmanly writing at the end, with Dover Wilson's sympathy for "modern euphuist", and Oscar Wilde (203) hammering the last nail in the coffin.

Kesson's study is, then, an attempt to overturn the prevalent image of Lyly as "a diminutive, uninteresting and sometimes even dangerous literary figure, defined by a pretentious, ridiculous and unmanly style called euphuism" (204). His efforts are largely successful, although after whetting the reader's appetite with glimpses of a dangerous, dissident writer who "repeatedly calls attention to the failings of authority figures in his work, repeatedly confronts censorship and the abuse of power and spent much of his life in apparent disfavour at court" (12), Kesson might have said more about Lyly's art and the thinking behind it. In short, the book is stronger on Lyly's impact than on his originality. There is also something of a paradox in the fact that Kesson's newly rendered Lyly is very much modern *à la* Shakespeare. Uncertainty, ambiguity, character, multiple perspectives, spontaneous thought on stage... these are all features that nowadays make the Bard so allegedly admirable. One is not sure whether Kesson's Lyly is meant as a cuckoo to eject the upstart crow from its nest, or is simply the result of applying aesthetic paradigms shaped inevitably by Shakespeare's literary-historical hegemony. Nonetheless, Gary Taylor's advocacy of Middleton as "our other Shakespeare" (2007) is now joined by Kesson's of Lyly. The question is whether the case for the latter might not stand better on difference than similarity.

Those cavils apart, Kesson is to be congratulated on his eloquent and scholarly reassessment of Lyly; also for suggesting some of the

hefty payoffs that might accrue on rethinking the whole relationship between stage and print. At one point he writes, "Cinemagoers generally do not go to the cinema to see a particular scriptwriter's film, and early modern theatregoers may have likewise watched *As You Like It* as a staging of Lodge's *Rosalind*" (22). That throwaway analogy offers a tantalising glimpse of the dizzying reorientation of hierarchies which is the promise of current research into the Elizabethan book trade. Meanwhile, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson and Middleton should budge up a bit and make room on their pedestal for Lyly.

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