

Hattaway, Michael 2005
Renaissance and Reformations:
An Introduction to Early Modern Literature
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In recent years we have witnessed the publication of a veritable spate of introductions to the literature of the English Renaissance designed for students and the general reader. One of the more conspicuous series of this kind is the one that Blackwell has been building up for a number of years now, and which includes, among many others, Dympna Callaghan's smart *Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (2001), David Bevington's Shakespeare biography (2002), the rich *Companion to English Literature and Culture*, edited by Michael Hattaway (2002), Laurie Maguire's *Studying Shakespeare* (2003), the 4-volume set of essays devoted to Shakespeare in terms of genre (edited by Jean Howard and Richard Dutton in 2003), as well as Arthur Kinney's edition of a range of canonical plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries (2004). Hattaway's *Renaissance and Reformations* is an attractive and valuable new addition to the series.

The overall structure of *Renaissance and Reformations* is based on the assumption expressed in the introduction that "our enjoyment of literature comes from a delight in a writer's verbal skills, from the satisfaction that comes from recognizing literary forms, and from reflection upon the complex ways by which texts might be related to one another and upon how they touch our own experience" (1).

For this reason, the opening chapter describes how terms such as 'literature' and 'fiction' meant different things in the early modern period, and how a writer would instead have been more familiar with disciplines of language, be it in Latin (as the staple of education) or in English (the language that gradually expanded and emancipated itself into an instrument for expressing the verbal skills that we tend to recognize as 'literature'). With many appropriate illustrations from familiar texts of the period (by writers including Shakespeare, Spenser, and Donne) and less familiar texts (by Fulke Greville, Aemilia Lanyer, Thomas Traherne and others), Hattaway

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demonstrates how our awareness of the early modern education in the arts of logic and rhetoric will enhance the reader's appreciation of the argumentation in the soliloquies, or the ironically tripartite structure of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." He shows how it facilitates our appreciation of commonplaces, proverbs and maxims, and of the writer's creative appropriation of such elements. For the pre-Romantic poet, to write verse or prose was to display a certain "skill or craft of making." The process rather than the product held centre stage as the poet gracefully imitated a particular substance or style with apparent ease. Hattaway further takes the reader through the "arts of rhetoric," making sure to set the contemporary meaning of the phrase off against our own pejorative and distorted sense. The author is strong on the manipulation of figures of speech (anadiplosis, isocolon, paranomasia, parison, stichomythia and the like) as he argues a case for the performative qualities of Renaissance verse. Obviously, as readers and as critics we must become attuned again to what Hattaway calls "the 'thinginess' of words" (33).

The second chapter of the book is devoted to the invention of printing and its impact on early modern culture. Hattaway has many times more questions than he can answer in the space available, but even stating the complexity of the topic has great merit. Hattaway neatly sketches the diverse cultures of reading: not intensive reading (of many different books) so much as extensive reading (or rereading of the same texts); communal reading; reading out-loud vs. reading silently during the transition phase from oral to literate culture. He provides a good listing of what appeared in print, like recreational books, including prose fiction (stories, novel), pamphlets, ballads, books of jests, 'chapbooks', and almanacs. But he also devotes attention to the way in which the Reformation, with Protestantism defined as "a religion of the Book and of the Word" (44), both furthered and was furthered by the new industry that reproduced and disseminated texts and ideas. It argues for the strength of this chapter (which could have encompassed the space of an entire book), that a case is made for the continuing importance of the manuscript tradition and the circulation of unprinted texts throughout the period. This issue almost naturally brings Hattaway to considerations about the status of the author, the issue of (self-) censorship, and of plays in print (which have tended to numb our awareness of the liveliness and improvisation that these texts occasioned on stage).

Determined to problematize the way in which English Renaissance literature welded tradition with innovation, chapter 3 provides a survey of the various genres in which literary artists worked, and simultaneously illustrates their origins and their new directions. Arguing a case for what he calls the “positive power of forms” (72), Hattaway discusses the various decorum-anchored genres as sites of creativity, as poetic battlegrounds where (more often than not) the issue of the vital encounter remains undecided. Of special interest are Hattaway’s discussions of the early modern epic (with its special hierarchy), tragedy (with its Roman and Medieval traditions eventually also channelled through Guarini to produce early-seventeenth-century tragicomedy in England), comedy, and masques. Given the wealth of genres and of applications, the subdivisions in this chapter unfortunately tend to fracture the material too much and, as is the case with the section on ‘Quantitative verse,’ add too little to be relevant.

Chapter 4 introduces the reader to early modern views of history and the practice of historiography. For Hattaway, the writing of history is closely linked to the writing of the nation, even though conflicting discourses may be seen at work simultaneously during the period. Polydor Vergil’s history, for example, undermines the Arthurian legend of Geoffrey of Monmouth. In this chapter, however, Hattaway mainly realigns the modern reader with early modern realities by stressing that our tendency to judge another period’s view of history, and the way it recorded this (historiography) by the criterion of accuracy is alien to the perception of Shakespeare and his contemporaries for whom political or moral goals determined the self-acknowledged representations of history that we know. In this connection, Shakespeare’s histories are particularly relevant, and Hattaway, a well-known expert in the field, discusses this “historiographic meta-fiction” with great panache. This chapter further profits from the discussion of continental historians like Tacitus, Plutarch, Machiavelli and Bodin, as well as Elizabethans and Jacobeans including John Hayward and, at considerable length, Sir Walter Raleigh whose *History of the World* allows for an in-depth discussion of the complex impact of the Reformation on the writing of providential history.

Chapter 5 inverts the focus and further develops the discussion of the way in which historiography and other modes of writing served to fashion the early modern nation’s present (as well

as its imagined future). In the case of historiography, the models were largely classical and biblical, and in this connection it is interesting to note how much republicanism was discussed under the Tudors. Biblical history, via the *Book of Homilies*, nourished visions of reforming the state, but it also merged with the discourse of the Golden Age as an attempt was made to capture the optimism and the opportunities that the new world seemed to offer. At the far end of the explicitly serious spectrum, we find Thomas More's *Utopia*, although its magic lay and lies in its ability to assume a central role at the same time, playing off against existing philosophies of social organisation and reform. Though less explicitly political or historical, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* deserves its mention here as well, since, like the *Utopia*, it helped readers "by indirections" to "find directions out." The early modern fool who features behind Erasmus' prose treatise for church reform, was not an asylum case, but one whose fantasies and satire helped to bring into focus the way society was organized (with all that that entails) and how it might be run if properly reformed. Returning to the literature of the age, Hattaway then, predictably perhaps, concentrates on *The Tempest* and Montaigne's essay "Of the Cannibals," but also, more creatively, on the subgenre of the idealizing 'country house poem' (Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst") and the satirical-cum-celebratory genres of *city* and of *citizen* comedy (Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton), testifying to the perceived fragility of a society whose structures registered the pressures that early modern capitalism and expansionism exerted.

Of special interest is chapter 6, devoted to "Fictive Persons and Places." Here Hattaway demonstrates how our post-Romantic view of character may lead us to misinterpret the rhetorical characterization in Renaissance drama, where allegorical characters, for example, serving to demonstrate certain issues may be no less 'real' than characters whom we recognize and with whom we find it easier (from our own, modern perspective) to identify. The author opens the reader's eyes to the many elements that may constitute a stage character, like verbal styles, image patterns, and costume. In terms of psychological interest, there is the theory of humours, and a significant degree of inwardness could also be revealed through the soliloquy. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to forget that the term 'character' is not synonymous with 'personality'. Just as the writer in the first instance drew on an existing store of more or less stock characters, he also relied on stock ingredients (like catalogues of

traits, commonplaces, and set descriptions) to deck out a character. Hattaway also sharpens our awareness of the persona granting dramatic force to, among other things, the Renaissance lyric. Much like character, Hattaway demonstrates, place in the literature of the period also has to be interpreted as part of a rhetorical strategy rather than as the result of realistic description.

The final chapter of Hattaway's book is devoted to the stamp that the Reformation and the period's religious factionalism left on its literature. In fact, Hattaway believes that this may well be more pervasive and determining than the impact of what, for the sake of convenience, we call the Renaissance in England. With reference to a vast range of examples from high and popular literature, he illustrates the diversity of responses to the religious transformation that took place across the nation: in the form of atheism, scepticism, the cultivation of Catholic spirituality, the discourse involving Protestant poetics. Especially attractive are the discussion of the sermon and its interreflections with plays like Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, as well as the discussion of the "mutual dependency between the languages of love and religion" in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, and the fusion of Christianity and Platonism in the poetry of George Chapman.

Michael Hattaway's introduction to early modern literature stands out for the lucid organisation of its material and its wide range of topics. *Renaissance and Reformation* gently and generously brings together the experience and insight of a full career in English Renaissance studies. It is also remarkable for the ever cautious way in which the author absorbs, interprets and presents Renaissance innovations and traditions against the background of recent theoretical debates (periodisation, chronology, history and literature, the canon, elite and popular literature). But no less noteworthy is the author's idiosyncratic, muscular style of writing. It captures an intellectual restlessness that gives each statement its thoroughly personal stamp. It also makes this book about a familiar area in English literature a cliché-free zone, a most refreshing read for students as well as teachers.

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