

Fernie, Ewan, Ramona Wray, Mark Thornton Burnett
and Clare Macmanus eds. 2005
Reconceiving the Renaissance: A Critical Reader
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In their introduction to *Reconceiving the Renaissance*, Ewan Fernie and Ramona Wray argue that “the choice to engage with theory and to interpret Renaissance literature and culture through theory, has, in effect, been made” (p.1), to point out that every other school of criticism has applied its proposals to the academically fruitful period of English Renaissance. Shakespeare, the Renaissance’s canonized totem, attracts such a vast amount of scholarly research that critics have explored every theoretical avenue in order to dissect his plays and poems. Conversely, these plays and poems have certainly spurred literary criticism to find accurate ways to describe phenomena which lead outside the text. This demand for fresh reconceptualization concerning the relationship between context of production and later contexts is the unifying principle of the works included in this ‘critical reader.’ Obviously, it would be extremely reductive to limit English Renaissance to Shakespeare and, consequently, *Reconceiving the Renaissance* makes an explicit effort to cover a diverse range of materials. After reading the selection of texts and the introductions of each chapter, the book gives the impression of being slightly tilted towards the playwright,; nevertheless, the anthology’s theoretical commitment and the authors’ contextualization facilitate the application of the content to different topics.

In any case, this volume is a useful starting point to apprehend some of the main theoretical proposals that have characterized the field of Renaissance Studies through applied examples. As opposed to specialized texts which focus on a specific theoretical area, the strongest quality of *Reconceiving the Renaissance* lies in its ambitious aim towards global and transversal interaction between literary theories, induced by each chapter’s preliminary contextualisation. By offering textual articulation of theory around six generic themes or units, the anthology avoids the kind of self-

containment that leaves the researcher isolated in her/his little corner of the theoretical universe, a frequent drawback associated with literary theory.

The book is divided into six sections, preceded by a general introduction which frames the content of the anthology to the last 25 years of critical theory. The introduction characterizes these last decades as origin and witness to the problematization that has provoked a radical re-evaluation of the English Renaissance, away from idyllic reconstructions. The rest of the six categories which constitute the bulk of materials provided in the anthology consist of a brief introduction that contextualizes each theoretical area, explains its phases of development, its most important contributors, their influence over later production, and the objections made from opposing discourses, together with more than 15 original texts from some of the most significant authors on the subject.

The first batch of texts revolves around the question of textuality. It covers the newly acquired relevance of bibliography and editing in the field of literary analysis, the implications of stressing 'the book' as material object, both in relation to the edition of 'primary texts' and to the recent reinvigoration of marginalia, binding and illustration. This section continues with examples of critical texts that resist the idea of the literary work as an individualized effort, underlining examples of collective writing and ultimately extending the notion of 'authorship' to the interaction and collaboration of different agents administering the text: actors, directors, censors, printers, etc. Texts provided in this section also tackle the ideological contexts behind any edition of Shakespeare's works and the "connections between textuality and gender, and queer theory and textual studies" (p.15), to finally move on to new editorial strategies, 'open text' approaches and the incorporation of technology to editing. Some of the critical texts provided in this section belong to Peter W. M. Blayney, Lukas Erne, Jeffrey Masten, Jonathan Goldberg, Andrew Murphy, Gary Taylor, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, amongst others.

The second section, *Histories*, is dedicated to New Historicism and Cultural Materialism through the "return of the literary work to the social, economic and cultural environment from whence it came" (p.85). Focusing on the field of production, this section covers the early stages of New Historicism, initially dominated by the use of the anecdote as a starting point for articulation, to then address the intervention of post-colonial, queer and feminist approaches into

these disciplines, which resulted in a “more densely sophisticated sense” (p.87) of the histories of gender, class or race. The last works in this section mirror a third stage in the area which shifts its interest to local concerns, the problematization of ‘Britain’ and British identity, and the study of ‘marginal’ texts such as travel narratives, corporation accounts or popular ballads which conform some of the latest contributions to the study of history and the Renaissance. The last essays in this section call for a sharper materialist focalization of the discipline that reflects recent complaints against both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Works selected for this section include texts by Louis Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, Jean Howard, Dymphna Callaghan, Mary Fuller, Adam Fox and Juliet Fleming, amongst others.

The selection of texts continues with the question of *appropriation*, addressing the afterlife and resonances of Renaissance or, rather, Shakespearean texts and confronting the translation of literature into other cultural products such as film, television, music, visual arts or the internet. The next group of texts is concerned with the mass consumption of the Renaissance, addressing materialist criticism, culture as capital, and Shakespeare as commodity through the analysis of cultural practices, marketing, advertising, the educational system or the tourist industry. This section moves on to contributions that describe the ideological discourses behind appropriation and Shakespeare’s internationalization, as well as sexual politics, reflections of class, gender, sexuality, marginality and ‘otherness’. It closes with texts on the perception of Shakespeare as stereotypical figure and the problems of his transformation into a reduced and vague “symbolic *essence*” (p.147). Texts provided include excerpts from Samuel Schoenbaum, Michael Anderegg, Courtney Lehmann, Michael Dobson, Lawrence Normand, Sarah Werner, Ania Loomba and Francesca T. Royster, amongst others.

The fourth section, *Identities*, describes the theoretical foundations of concepts such as the constructed subject, self, identity or subjectivity in relation to the English Renaissance. The complexity of identity is explored, in the first series of texts, through the importance of language in the definition of the self, the unreliable identity of the author, or the constructed identity of literary characters. The second section of this unit is entirely devoted to applications of Foucault’s concept of ‘the other’ through Renaissance texts and the circulation and negotiation of power around the different layers of society. The next group of essays addresses the

relationships between different types of selves, the notion of 'centre' and 'margin', and the Gramsci/Spivak concept of 'the subaltern', defined as the "voicelessness of those whose experiences are not recorded" (p. 213). The chapter closes with a body of works that explore death as the limit of 'the human' the relationship of death and subjectivity, and the problematization of the human/non-human duality, which are all part of the still ongoing debate about identity and the self. Some of the texts provided in this section include the work of Alan Sinfield, Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore, Ania Loomba, Valerie Traub, Lorna Hutson, Margo Hendricks and David Scott Kastan.

After this, *Reconceiving the Renaissance* explores the material conditions of the text and the centrality of the human body in the physiological conception of the subject where, for the first group of texts, critics have underlined "the organic unity of mind, body and soul during the Renaissance" (p.279). The second set of contributions project the body as a politicised text, based on Foucault's suggestion on the influence of historical power over subjectivity. This view is counterbalanced by a second set of texts which conceive the body, following the Lacanian articulation, as resistant to theory, ideological discourse and construction. A third group of texts offers a description of the body as "the site of identity formation" (p.280) in terms of sexuality and desire, refusing biological determinism to later move on to its symbolic potential and the institutionalization of the body. This section closes with a group of texts that address Marxist materialism and the 'reification' of the subject in relation to Renaissance studies, the cultural circulation of objects, and current debates over materiality which have witnessed a renewed interest in the spiritual. Original texts are provided by Francis Barker, Nancy Vickers, Patricia Parker, Gail Kern Paster, Louis Montrose, Jonathan Dollimore and Valerie Traub, amongst others.

The last section of this 'critical reader' is dedicated to the deconstruction of literature and literary value through critical contributions that dissent from traditional and essentialist notions of judgement, underlining the mutability of conventions and the historicity of taste in close relation to 'canonical texts.' A second group of texts address *engagé* criticism, and explicitly questions the impossibility of avoiding political issues when assessing literary texts. The section provides a selection of texts that fall into the newly created label of *New Aestheticism*, which tries to conciliate "the value and the distinctiveness of art" (p.354) with postmodern approaches

that favour historicism and diversity. The book closes with a selection of texts that exemplify recent problematizations of historicist approaches, ethical and political values through the claims of commodification, conservatism, and commercialization of academia. This section includes works by Kim Hall, Stephen Greenblatt, Derek Attridge, Catherine Belsey, Patricia Parker, Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Bate, John J. Joughin, Don E. Wayne, Jacques Derrida and Jonathan Dollimore, amongst others.

Each of these six broad theoretical areas is supplemented by a bibliography for further reading of ten basic references. It is worth noticing that both the main critical works provided and the basic bibliography suggested are firmly up-to-date, the earlier text dating from the 80s, the latest from 2004. The bibliography for the introductions to each unit also constitutes a useful resource to find material about a specific area ranging from ten (*Materiality*) to a hundred references (*Values*). The final alphabetical index, disposition of content and reader-friendly organization makes *Reconceiving the Renaissance* a particularly useful volume to keep close at hand.

Especially if trying to cover such a vast field, the selection of texts in a critical anthology is always a difficult task. In *Materiality*, both the introduction and the texts seem a little disjointed and lack the solid unity of the other chapters. Further, the anthology is slightly restricted to the field of production and even the section on *Appropriation* fails to acknowledge the areas of performance, audience or reception, which constitute a significant body of theory.¹ One last aspect to consider is the limited reference to the initial theoretical works that triggered subsequent critical interventions, leaving at times the deceptive impression that Renaissance Studies is the source of these theoretical articulations. Although some introductions successfully refer to pre-existing theoretical foundations and the authors admittedly rely on examples within Renaissance studies, a wider reference to genetic sources would have provided greater rigour and facilitated further research.

On the whole, this anthology is a useful initial text to those seeking an update on theoretical interventions in the Renaissance, those who are planning on switching to a different area of study, those who want to make sure they do not miss a few indispensable contributions, or those who want to review key elements in the quest

¹ See *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, ed. by James Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996) or the *Shakespeare in Production* series by Cambridge University Press.

for new ideas. An interesting collection for researchers outside the field, an excellent collection to those involved in the study of the English Renaissance and Shakespeare and, most importantly, a great opportunity to experience the interrelation of the different theoretical areas and get a global perspective on critical thinking.

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