

Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama. Jeremy Lopez.
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Noting what we all know, that the canon of early modern English plays in our teaching curriculum is pretty fixed, in the edited separate texts we use, in anthologies, and in critical discussions generated by the contents of that corpus, what if anything can be done to refashion that tradition? How did this all come about? How much is it in need of reformation, and what sorts of plays are we neglecting? Jeremy Lopez wittily traces the way in which the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists were separated out for purposes of teaching early in the twentieth century, purportedly at least as a means of reducing costs for students and of conforming to emerging categories in the teaching curriculum. What was originally formulated in William Alan Nielson's *The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists, Excluding Shakespeare* (1911) has hardened into orthodoxy.

To me, the picture is not entirely bleak, though still of serious concern. Given the huge prominence of Shakespeare today, the move to provide teaching texts of his contemporaries in individual editions and in anthologies seems practical. And the choices of plays are perhaps not as codified as this book suggests. The more traditional anthologies of the twentieth century provided samples of a wide variety of genres and theatrical conditions, aimed at documenting literary history. Some more recent collections focus more intently on those dramatists who are demonstrably great: Marlowe, Jonson, Middleton, and Webster, along with some plays like Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* that do well on their own and are not infrequently staged. Beaumont and Fletcher's plays once reigned supreme on the English stage, but do not do so now, other than, occasionally, Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.

That having been said, greater flexibility in the canon is manifestly desirable, and to me the best parts of this book are its apt discussions of plays we need to know better, including Dekker and Webster's *Northward Ho!*, Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Laws of Candy*, William Rowley's *A Cure for a Cuckold*, Fletcher's *Wit Without Money*, Chapman's *Monsieur D'Olive*, Thomas Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Dekker and Day's (?) *Guy of Warwick*, and Ford's *The Fancies Chaste and Noble*. Lopez makes

a compelling case for taking *Northward Ho!*, for example, out of its near anonymity, inviting us to revel in the hilarity that erupts when the play's characters, in separate groups, head for the great bed of Ware, some of them stopping off at Bedlam hospital on their journey. The madhouse scene especially becomes a meditation on "the mutually constitutive relation between comic and tragic experience" (195). Earlier, a sleepwalking scene at the home of Mayberry, a London merchant, is fascinating in its resemblance to the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth*, with the crucial difference that here Kate, Greenshield's wife, is not really sleepwalking; this is her device for covering up her inventive adultery. *Guy of Warwick* is another promising "find," with its major innovation of plot and character not found in the play's source: the introduction of "a decidedly Elizabethan clown," Philip Sparrow, who "relentlessly ironizes the hero's exploits." The result is that we are given two versions of English folk history: one is about "the crusader who begets the child of empire before leaving to extend that child's inheritance," while the other is about "the rustic for whom foreign adventure is a means to avoid the consequences of antisocial behavior at home" (171). Fletcher and Massinger's *The Custom of the Country* engagingly introduces an incestuous motif, of Rutilio's becoming a rival of his son for the love of Rutilio's mother, into Cervantes's tragicomic tale of Zenocia and Transilia, thereby "imposing an unthought-of unity upon Cervantes' novel of disparate tales" (87). Other refreshingly heterodox nominations of new texts for us to deploy in our classrooms include Robert Taylor's *The Hog Hath Lost His Pearl*, Chapman's *Sir Giles Goosecap*, Thomas Heywood's *The Escapes of Jupiter*, and several anonymous plays: *The Tragedy of Nero*, *Look About You*, *Dick of Devonshire*, and *The Fair Maid of Bristow*.

I am happy to have read this entertaining and provocative book, and I hope it will goad us all into exploring plays in class that can open up new perspectives on the incredibly rich trove of early modern English plays too often reduced to formulaic choices.

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