

*Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London.*

Anna Bayman.

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Toward the end of Elizabeth's reign, Thomas Dekker (ca. 1572–1632) embarked on a career as a prolific author, initially of dramatic works for the London theater. Although not known today outside the ranks of academic specialists, in Jacobean England he was a prominent writer who worked with, and later was derided by, other leading luminaries, notably Ben Jonson. After the accession of James I, and the plague-induced closure of the theaters, he turned to writing prose pamphlets that brought him greater fame, though not wealth. (He spent several years in debtors' prison.) His most well-known pamphlets (e.g., *Lanthorne and Candle-Light* [1608]; *The Gulls Horne-Booke* [1609]) were reprinted many times and continued to be published long after his death.

Bayman's book covers the second stage of Dekker's career, as the author of Jacobean pamphlets. Her study deftly situates this work not only in its literary context, but in relation to larger socioeconomic forces. Bayman's principal thesis is that Dekker was one of the most reflective writers on the discursive culture of what he called "this printing age" in which "the begetting of books, is as common as the begetting of children" (1, 5). To be sure, publications by Jonson, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, and other writers feature reflections on the cultural implications of print technology and commercially motivated publication. But Dekker's pamphlets display "profound sensitivity" (13, and see 3, 9, 62, 65) to this development. Bayman places Dekker in the middle ground of writers who ranged from the university wits, such as Greene and Nashe, to the plebian, self-taught Water Poet, John Taylor (47). As a pamphleteer, Dekker never had the sustained patronage that allowed Jonson "to affect to despise the popular London market . . . which Dekker was happy to embrace" (42, and see 65).

As Bayman probes Dekker's perceptive and ironic views on the commercial culture of pamphleteering in early modern England, she crafts a compelling assessment of Dekker. This displaces other assessments by literary scholars that Dekker was a hack writer devoid of principle or consistency, a promoter of militant Calvinist Protestantism, or a tout for capitalism. Instead, Bayman argues that Dekker consistently belabored standard literary themes — e.g., rogues and their gulls (victims), prisons and crime, the plague, mock almanacs — in conjunction with his "utterly conventional" views of religion (120).

But alongside this conventionality, Bayman discerns an acutely reflexive sensibility, saturated with ambivalence toward market-driven production of inexpensive pamphlet literature. For Dekker, authorship is a performance that relies on the same inauthenticity and deceit that conventional Jacobean morality decried in commercial avarice. On one level, duplicity, instability, and fluidity inhere in the meanings given off by performances of the stock characters — the gull, the rogue, the merchant, the author — who populate Dekker's narratives. On another level, Dekker's authorial practices resemble the antics of gulls and rogues. By flattering readers with intimations that they are not gullable, Dekker

gulls them into buying his books. On yet another level, Dekker presumes that, for any single pamphlet, “an infinitely diverse readership” (66) generates incommensurate interpretations of the text. Dekker’s remarks on readership indicate that he thought he wrote for a very heterogeneous audience, which amplified his perceptions about divergent meanings that readers attached to pamphlets.

The conjunction of reflexive sensibility and conventional morality underpins the “complicity of Dekker’s pamphlets in the London world he simultaneously celebrates and condemns” (109) and generates the ambivalence that permeates Dekker’s reflections on contemporary moral issues. Bayman successfully advances this nuanced assessment, which portrays Dekker as a stunted postmodernist. He is most sensitive to textual instability and the fluidity of meanings attached to texts, but also credulously conventional about “the moral difficulties inherent in commerce and urban expansion” (77). For him, London was “a world in which normal social and moral values were frequently inverted” (115).

In short, Bayman’s book is well written and accessible to social historians as well as literary scholars. It offers a compelling assessment of Dekker’s complex relationship to the culture of pamphleteering and it is therefore a welcome contribution to work on this vibrant topic.

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