



**Anna Bayman, *Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London* (Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington, 2014), ISBN 9780754661733, 160 pages, hb, £65.00**

Reviewed by

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The life and works of the criminally under-studied early modern English writer Thomas Dekker (c. 1572-1632) are fascinating. He was an imprisoned debtor, prolific pamphleteer, eager collaborator with other writers, and brilliant dramatist in his own right (as 1599's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* proves). Because the drama of the period occupies so much attention, and because prose pamphlets have for so long been seen as at best supplementary material to that drama (and at worst tacky, trashy, unreliable cheap print), it is a bold move to foreground the vitality and significance of Dekker's pamphlet output, as this book does. Some of Dekker's vitality and significance is therefore caught in Anna Bayman's clear and pragmatic prose, which does an excellent job of showing him as being enmeshed, as many were, in the multiple, richly-textured, shifting, and overlapping networks of sociability, commerce, credit and debt characterising life in Elizabethan and Jacobean London. Such networks were especially evident to, and indeed constituted, the world of cheap print publishing in which Dekker played so active and so self-conscious a role. As Bayman notes, Dekker's prose 'repeatedly' makes an 'analogy' between 'commercial and discursive exchange' (149), and her opening

chapters elucidate the density of the material connections attendant on pamphlet culture, and Dekker's career, which made this analogy telling. Bayman is therefore particularly strong on explicating Dekker's symbiotic relationship with London: as she notes at the start of a chapter on this relationship, 'the capital was always visible in Dekker's prose' (67). This relationship was inevitable: when Dekker wrote 'all of the presses that legitimately printed pamphlets were in London, and so too were the bookshops of the publishers who usually funded the print runs' (16). His 'powerfully topographical' (70) pamphlets cast back an image of London to London readers. This image was, in Bayman's view, 'surprisingly unified' (71), if not always harmonious or genteel. With *The Wonderful Year* (1603), Bayman attests, Dekker inaugurated 'a distinct genre of London-oriented prose writing' (129). When writing of religion in the Jacobean era Dekker, says Bayman, cultivated a 'relative tolerance' which 'may reflect the London bias of his work', in that the city presented 'a range of confessional identities' which meant 'many of its inhabitants found it convenient to live and let live' (121). But Dekker's prose output also disclosed another form of flattening: 'Rogues, and specific vices, are found everywhere in the city' (71). Bayman repeatedly insists that by showing this, Dekker 'reduced the city's capacity to frighten and alienate by making it entertaining' (115), at the same time as showing the 'benefits' of rogues to society (10). Noting this (so often), and acknowledging the way Dekker 'gave the lie to conventional complaints about rogues' (109) perhaps underplays the extent of some pamphleteers' critiques of what those with power did to those without it. As Miles Taylor affirms: 'For Dekker, the urban poor were not an alien culture to be brought to discipline, but the victims of a pitiless economy and a lawless justice system.'<sup>i</sup>

It is important to put the pamphlets centre-stage, as this book does, because so many have associated their tangibly 'topical commentary' with 'trivial subject matter' or 'a light-hearted, populist or scurrilous approach' (7); hack work, in short. The parts of *Thomas Dekker* that resist such reductiveness contribute significantly to our understanding of this cultural world. However, maybe a different facet to pamphlets' significance might have been revealed more consistently. In a perhaps too brief summary, Bayman admits that to write about the 'interaction' of the drama and the prose would require 'a much longer book', and that she is interested primarily in a 'subset' of the public sphere (4). This is true, but a bit of a shame, too: yes, Bayman devotes a subsection of four pages to 'Writing for the Theatre and the City' (39-42), but spending a little more time on this 'interaction' would not necessarily subjugate the pamphlets to just tools for reading the plays. Instead, we would see that what Bayman (and others) show us as being special about the pamphlets (by Dekker and others) makes what *seems* special about the drama both less and more distinct. Dekker's writings evince 'ambiguity...internal conflicts and inconsistencies'; they have a 'capacity to interrogate' their own medium (4). We can say the same of early modern plays, but we need more insights into what happens if we do.<sup>ii</sup>

For, of course, if prose and city were symbiotic, so too were prose and drama. Sometimes their links were obvious: Bayman suggests Dekker began writing prose as a 'fall-back option when writing opportunities for the stage dried up, starting in 1603 when the plague closed the theatres' (19). Moreover, given

London's networks of cultural production and consumption, there was 'some overlap' (31) between audiences for prose and plays (despite the difference in price, with a pamphlet being more costly than a cheap theatre trip). And aesthetic or ideological bonds are evident, with both theatre and prose offer those diverse overlapping audiences 'heterogeneity and nuance' (146), being 'both transgressive and corrective' (85).

Equally, we might reflect whether some of Dekker's distinction is lost by positioning him in so dense a milieu: at times, Bayman resorts to saying Dekker often does something someone else did, or prompted someone else to do. However, this tendency lessens in discussions of Dekker's 'rogue' or cony-catching' pamphlets, which were, like others', fantastically engaging as they simultaneously condemned and celebrated the petty criminals they depicted. Bayman attributes to Dekker the construction of a 'distinctively metropolitan...and...Jacobean' (89-90) representation of such criminality, which is welcome. That said, while Bayman has elsewhere attended to the rogue pamphlets' 'voice' and narrative effects, perhaps more here on their literary stylistics would have been useful (110).<sup>3</sup>

The absence of a bibliography (for which we cannot hold the author accountable) is problematic, especially when the argument deals with so many early modern sources and features so much cross-referencing. But this does not compromise a work that both consolidates and appreciably develops much of what we known about literary production in early modern London.

## Notes

1. "Teach Me This Pedlar's French': The Allure of Cant in *The Roaring Girl* and Dekker's Rogue Pamphlets', *Renaissance and Reformation*, XXIX, 4 (Fall, 2005), 107-24, p. 115.
2. For a classic example of this approach, offering such insights, see Martine Van Elk, 'Urban Misidentification in *The Comedy of Errors* and the Cony-Catching Pamphlets', *Studies in English Literature* 43. 2 (Spring 2003): 323-46.
3. See Anna Bayman, 'Rogues, Cony-catching and the Scribbling Crew', *History Workshop Journal* 63 (2007), 1-17.

## About the contributor

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