

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Jennifer C. Vaught, *Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). xi+195pp. ISBN 978 1 4094 3208 1.

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The introduction to *Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England* promises a striking thesis, and necessarily so because it comes in the wake of a number of critical studies whose subject is similarly the intersection of festive and literary culture in early modern England. These include Michael Bristol's *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (1985); Leah Marcus's *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (1986); François Laroque's *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (1988; translated by Janet Lloyd, 1991); Ronald Knowles's edited volume, *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin* (1998); and Phebe Jensen's *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare's Festive World* (2008), each of which has extended C. L. Barber's and Bakhtin's seminal research, which appeared in the 1950's and 1960's, respectively, in significant directions. Finding a median position between Bakhtinian philosophizing and a more historically attentive form of scholarship, Vaught sets out to argue that the practice of festive culture is 'ideologically malleable and accessible to everyone' (p. 8), belonging neither wholly to the 'popular' or 'elite' traditions, but rather open to appropriation by all. 'Appropriation' is a keyword here, signifying the manner in which writers and revellers alike produce and reproduce festive culture by way of a carnivalesque *imitatio* (i.e. by eating, digesting, and cannibalising festive practices; p. 20).

While this may sound like a promising argument, the subsequent chapters are largely unsuccessful in making the case for it. In a series of loosely-structured readings, Vaught demonstrates the prevalence of carnivalesque motifs in the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Dekker, and Jonson, and the poetry of Spenser, Milton, and Herrick in a style of argumentation that is often unpersuasive. All too frequently is the epithet

‘carnavalesque’ appended to the subject of a sentence in lieu of a more developed examination. Vaught focuses on aspects of her chosen texts that are by no means obviously festive, only to base unsubstantiated conjectures upon the slightest word or phrase. Spenser’s description of Lucifera’s castle as being a ‘dreadfull spectacle’, for example, is supposedly suggestive of the court masques performed during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, which are in turn said to be based on the popular mummers’ plays (p. 70).

It is not that the festive undercurrent of these texts is in dispute. Rather, the book sets about re-reading what has already been read well without contributing to the debate. Despite claims to the contrary (p. 2, n. 3), Vaught’s is a well-trodden field of study and so offering a new take is imperative to reward the reader’s efforts. Attempts to bolster the book’s originality by introducing tantalising terms like ‘grotesque imperialists’ or ‘republicanism’ do not amount to much as they are subject to only a cursory and intermittent discussion, and at any rate they seem tangential to the book’s central theme. The most novel contribution, if only because it is unexpected, is to be found in the final chapter, ‘The Decline of Carnavalesque Egalitarianism’, where the focus abruptly shifts from seventeenth-century England to nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Beginning with an analysis of Milton’s and Herrick’s contestations over the significance of holiday customs and festivities during and around the English civil wars, a part of the book not without its merits, the chapter awkwardly transitions to a discussion of the Mardi Gras ‘krewes’ which participated in processions in New Orleans after the American Civil War. This is certainly a legitimate line of inquiry, but one likely to frustrate readers not expecting to depart from England, or indeed the early modern period.

The book appears most hindered by its too narrow focus on canonical texts at the expense of poems, plays, and historical documents that would be more apposite to the argument. That Vaught’s account of nationhood, ‘alien scapegoats’, and feasting in Chapter 1 fails even to allude to the Shakespearean scenes of *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, recently edited for the Arden Shakespeare series by John Jowett, evinces a lack of awareness as far as the possibilities of the study are concerned. Even a superficial reading of the following passage depicting the ‘ill May Day’ riots of 1517 would yield rich fruits, particularly in regards to Vaught’s alimentary interests, which apparently also falls by the wayside (see p. 3, n. 4):

LINCOLN: Peace, hear me! He that will not see a red herring at a Harry goat, butter at eleven pence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.

OTHER 'C'GEORGE BETTS'C: It will come to that pass if strangers be suffered. Mark him.

LINCOLN: Our country is a great eating country; *argo* they eat more in our country than they do in their own.

OTHER 'C'CLOWN BETTS'C: By a halfpenny loaf a day, troy weight.

LINCOLN: They bring in strange roots, which is merely to the undoing of poor prentices. For what's a sorry parsnip to a good heart?

OTHER 'C'WILLIAMSON'C: Trash, trash. They breed sore eyes, and 'tis enough to infect the City with the palsy.

LINCOLN: Nay, it has infected it with the palsy, for these bastards of dung – as you know, they grow in dung – have infected us, and it is our infection will make the City shake. Which partly comes through the eating of parsnips.

OTHER 'C'CLOWN BETTS'C: True, and pumpkins together.

(*Sir Thomas More*, 6. 1-21)

With such relatively neglected wonders available to the scholar of early modern festive culture (not to mention the vast encyclopaedic riches of the *Records of Early English Drama*, published by the University of Toronto Press and freely available online), it is a shame that Vaught fails to make use of them.

Works Cited

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