

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Marta Straznicky, ed., *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). 384pp. ISBN 978 0 8122 4454 0.

Tom Rooney
Central European University
rooneyt@ceu.hu

In *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication* (2004), Zachary Lesser suggests that 21st-century readers should consider how 16th- and 17th-century stationers read the plays they issued, and 'that thinking of plays as publishers thought of them, as commodities, can change the ways in which we read these plays themselves' (p. 4). He also argues that 'the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher, and their contemporaries will in fact take on new meanings if we pay attention to the people who published them' (p. 10). Lesser's method is to examine the plays a particular stationer issued within the context of that stationer's whole career; as a result he sheds new light on familiar titles such as *Othello*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Such an analysis, he points out, is 'not merely sociological or historical, but also literary critical' (p. 17).

Lesser is one of nine contributors to *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography*, a fine new collection of sociological-historical-literary critical essays on some of the printers, publishers and booksellers involved in the publication of Shakespeare's plays and poems between 1593 and 1640. In her introductory essay editor Marta Straznicky, like Lesser before her, makes the case that many stationers in early modern London need to be understood not only as men working in a trade but as readers of the texts they ushered into print. *Shakespeare's Stationers* is thus an investigation of 'how commerce intersected with culture' (p. 2) and an 'attempt to identify and trace the various kinds of agency exercised by stationers and one press licenser as Shakespeare's texts passed through their hands' (p. 8). The stationers include Thomas Creede, Andrew Wise, Nicholas Ling, Edward Blount, John Norton and John Waterson; the licenser is Zachariah Pasfield.

These essays — as the collection's title suggests — focus on the stationers not the poet-playwright. Each one adds to our understanding of the works of the latter through an examination of the work of the former. The essays also cohere as a collection; the insights of one writer often complement those of another. In her overview of Shakespearean publication from 1593 to 1621, for example, Alexandra Halasz rightly reminds us that to a stationer a title was first and foremost a property, and that as such he was entitled, like a building owner, to receive rent in return for it. She also points out that stationers only held the property rights to the printed play; the theatre company still had the right to stage the play in the form they had it. Later Holger Schott Syme puts to rest the old canard about desperate theatre companies dumping unpopular properties onto the stationers in order to make quick profits. The evidence shows just the opposite: there seems to have been an effort to turn successes on the stage into successes in the bookshop. Syme's examination of the career of Thomas Creede bears this out.

In some essays familiar stationers are examined from new angles; in others the writer breaks new ground. Adam G. Hook reassesses the career of Andrew Wise by comparing the stationer's publications of sermons and plays, while Sonia Massai reconsiders Edward Blount's involvement in the publication of the 1623 Folio by examining the stationer's place in a network that included the Folio's dedicatees, William and Phillip Herbert. New ground is broken by two of the most knowledgeable young scholars working on 16th and 17th century dramatic publication — Alan B. Farmer in 'John Norton and the Politics of History Plays in Caroline England', and the aforementioned Zachary Lesser in 'Shakespeare's Flop: John Waterson and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*'. Farmer's investigation of the republication of several English history plays at a turbulent time in English history is particularly astute; these plays retained 'a certain political currency' (p. 149) in the years leading up to the Civil War, and Norton probably published them as much for political reasons as economic ones. Lesser himself goes beyond looking at a play in the career of one stationer, and looks at one in the context of the whole life of a 'publishing shop', that is 'a stationer's bookshop (location, sign, size and so forth), his retail stock-in-trade, and his publishing copies' (p. 178). In this case Lesser examines the shop started by Simon Waterson, The Crown. Simon had a prosperous career; his son did not. Lesser considers their contrasting fortunes through the kinds of work they published, for example how the father judiciously exploited his connections in Cambridge at the start of his career to concentrate on academic texts among others. John inherited many titles from his father, but seems to have squandered most of them; in the process he also got involved in issuing the first edition of the co-authored *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Lesser shows how this 'flop' is not surprising given John Waterson's poor business acumen.

Skeptics who have doubts that we can understand how a stationer read a play four centuries ago should turn to ‘Nicholas Ling’s Republican *Hamlet* (1603)’ by Kirk Melnikoff. Building on Andrew Hadfield’s chapter ‘The Radical *Hamlet*’ in *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (2005), Melnikoff argues that the first quarto appears to be one more republican text in stationer Andrew Ling’s output; his evidence for this is the use of inverted commas to highlight some of the words in the text spoken by the counselor Corambis (i.e. Polonius). Melnikoff argues that these annotations expound republican thoughts, and were probably added by the publisher. Ling is known for issuing publications with republican leanings throughout his career, as well as publishing collections where lines were annotated for the reader. These two tendencies come together in part of the text of Q1, and allow us to read these passages anew through Ling’s eyes. The debate about the merits of Q1 will never end; however, those who simply dismiss the 1603 edition as a corrupt theatrical text are overlooking one early reader’s literary-historical response to it.

Melnikoff’s essay is one of the highlights of the collection. William Proctor Williams’s essay on Zachariah Pasfield also stands out, and not only because it focuses on a licenser rather than a stationer. Pasfield’s name can be found in more than 200 entries in the Stationers’ Register, and he is important to students of printed drama because between 1600 and 1608 he licensed 16 playbooks for publication, including *Hamlet* and *Every Man in His Humour*, yet his career never seems to have been documented until now. At one point Williams draws some tentative conclusions about Pasfield’s relationship with stationers after examining the entries for 1601, and then interjects: ‘It is not much, but it is a start’ (p. 72). This is unduly modest, as we learn a lot about Pasfield both here and throughout the essay. A transcription of Pasfield’s will included in the notes, and an appendix listing all the books he licensed between 1600 and 1610, are valuable resources that should inspire future scholars. One drawback to this otherwise informative list is that only the titles of playbooks are included; all the other entries note the STC number only. A reader can see, for example, that on 2 August 1602 Pasfield was in attendance when George Bishop entered STC 15007, but she will need to go online or to the library to learn that this entry refers to *A complaint against securitie in these perillous times: written by M. Tho. Kingsmill*.

The nine essays are followed by two appendices. The first is ‘Shakespearean Publications, 1591–1640’, a chronological table with details on all the plays and poems issued during this time period which had at least one edition with a title page attribution to Shakespeare, as well as *The Taming of a Shrew* and the apocryphal titles later included in the 1664 version of the Third Folio. In these entries Straznicky adds missing information from the title page if it is known (e.g. the name of the printer) and indicates

which stationers are profiled in the second appendix: ‘Selected Stationers Profiles’ — a seventy-page alphabetical guide to 39 stationers, some of whom cannot be found in other resources such as the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Each entry in this section begins with a short biography of the stationer with important dates, an overview of his work (they are all male), as well as a note on any links he had to other stationers discussed in the collection. This is followed by a chronological table of all Shakespearean publications he was involved in with information from the title page, the imprint, and the STC number. Each entry concludes with a short list of references. It is nice to have all the information in Appendix A in one place, but there will not be much new here for most readers. Appendix B, however, is a goldmine of information; this is a resource I think everyone interested in the publication of Shakespeare’s plays and poems will use, and return to. I also believe many readers will return to the insightful essays that precede it in *Shakespeare’s Stationers*.

Works Cited

- Hadfield, Andrew, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Lesser, Zachary, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).