

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Gary A. Schmidt, *Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). pp. 246. ISBN 978 1 4094 5118 1.

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Recent scholarship on the early modern age frequently returns to the trope of hybridity to show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the aesthetic output, readerly preferences, and overall intellectual world-view during that historical moment were neither committed exclusively to notions of purity nor strictly averse to concepts of mixture. Gary Schmidt's monograph thus complements works such as Marcie Frank's *Gender, Theatre, and the Origins of Criticism*, John Scheckter's *The Isle of Pines*, or Wolfram Schmidgen's *Exquisite Mixture*. Like these studies, his *Renaissance Hybrids* sets out to demonstrate that generic categories were applied in highly creative and uninhibited ways by early modern authors, with his focus on the Renaissance setting the starting point for these developments further in the past than other scholarship has done.

The first chapter approaches questions of purity and identity through a focus on Roger Ascham's writing about cultural inheritance and national mixture. Schmidt convincingly contrasts Ascham's self-fashioning as a classical humanist scholar in the tradition of Hellenistic and Roman antiquity with the schoolmaster's abhorrence of the Italianate Englishmen who frequently returned from the Continent. The intellectual journey that allows British thinkers to engage with the intellectual legacy of earlier centuries and of other cultures bespeaks a kind of hybridization that, in Homi Bhabha's sense, Schmidt presents as a positive contribution to the way in which the early modern age approached questions of mixture and impurity. Inspired by the figure of the centaur Chiron, whose role as a teacher of kings places him prominently in the humanist tradition, Schmidt discusses the 'ambiguous relationship' (p. 49) that connected English Renaissance scholars to their particular versions of Roman ruins. It is through learning and refinement, what Jeff Dolven has discussed as *Scenes of Instruction*, that Schmidt

sees these scholars move beyond the confines of indigenous traditions and the physical lines of inheritance connecting them to their parochial forefathers.

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and his *Vewe of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) serve as the next step in Schmidt's argument, which relates these works' cultural intermingling to the historical conflict between England and Ireland and shows how they forced questions of cultural and national integrity into the public discourse. Schmidt repeatedly returns to the matter of giants in Spenser's work, seeing in these grotesque mythical figures evidence for Spenser's muted understanding that notions of national purity invariably have to silence aspects of early myths that do not fit the self-image of any present self-esteem. Giants, and their slaying, remind readers of the cultural ghosts in their closets, yet they also provide authors with an opportunity to present 'salutary forms of hybridity' (p. 75) that are intimately linked to the national narrative and thus attach to it an essential sense of instability. Schmidt next, and productively, reads the manner in which the mythology surrounding King Arthur has been co-opted by early modern writers and monarchs to blend the hereditary lines of Briton and Saxon histories. In Spenser's appropriation of figures like Arthur or Merlin, Schmidt detects the urge to unite 'the fragments of a nation' (p. 81) while, at least implicitly, admitting to their hybrid core. In the Anglo-Irish conflict, too, Schmidt detects various in-between layers, for instance in the faction of the Old English, which put in play the supposedly stable identities of particular nations. The colonialist project of the British Crown in Ireland, for Spenser, becomes increasingly marked by an understanding that 'boundaries of racial and national identities are porous' (p. 109); yet his *Vewe* remains also committed to essentialist tropes of racial purity and infection that show a resistance towards ideas of both change and interchange. Schmidt agrees with earlier criticism on this issue that, in the end, Spenser's political vision is based on an understanding of an underlying homology between England and Ireland that allows for various forms of cultural exchange.

This idea of exchange is then discussed, in two separate chapters, in the context of generic hybridity as found in satire and tragicomedy. The long chapter on satire only loosely connects to questions of hybridity in that the generic term itself speaks to a certain hybrid uncertainty, for instance with respect to its dual etymological connection to both Latin and Greek terms. Having established this connection, the chapter turns to various textual examples of satirical writing. One textual corpus that matters to Schmidt's argument consists of the Marprelate tracts and their satirical attack on established religion. The satyr as human-animal blend serves as a reminder of the impurity of this genre, and it simultaneously figures blended hierarchies and socio-cultural redefinitions of integrity. The chapter then, once again, returns to Spenser and

various scenes and figures from his work that relate to satirical modes and tones; it also devotes much energy to close readings of Shakespeare. Throughout, satire is used as a means to discuss questions of generic hybridity. While Schmidt's close textual analyses frequently tease out intricate details from his literary sources, the overall theme of Renaissance hybrids at times seems somewhat strained as it appears to exist mostly in contrast to a very Catholic devotion to generic purity that, almost regardless of historical context, is only rarely to be found in literary writing that aims at aesthetic or philosophical depth.

The final chapter, on Stuart tragicomedy, connects the rise of this dramatic genre to the contemporary social and political developments that sought to renegotiate the manner in which absolutism and popular interests related to each other. Drawing on G. B. Guarini's generic positioning, the chapter situates the hybridity of tragicomedy within historical debates about generic purity and possibilities for alterations. One major concern for poetological debates relates to the question of whether tragicomedy includes political dimensions, in effect asking whether its particular kind of generic mixture also invites mixed forms of political governance. Most of the actual discussion then nevertheless focuses on individual scenes and characters from a variety of early modern drama, looking for tragicomic hybridity in the actual plot-constructions as well as in political realities that are reflected in the plays. With tragicomedy accepted as a given, the chapter foregoes an opportunity to enquire into the genre's instability. While tragicomedy clearly merges two generic traditions, its acceptance at the time as a genre in its own right, poorly regarded and rarely chosen as it might have been, only partly serves this study's overall theme. Indeed, the discussion of Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* points out that social mingling was frequently avoided in the play, thus demonstrating that even within supposedly hybrid genres social conventions were carefully preserved.

The study's brief afterword addresses questions of hybridity in the context of bio-ethics, with Schmidt suggesting that the Renaissance's tolerant attitude towards generic and biological mixture anticipates more recent debates in postcolonial studies, where racial purity and cultural essentialism increasingly give way to a more positive embracing of heterogeneity. The conclusion's attempt to tag into contemporary debates reveals that this study was probably concluded around 2005, explaining why more recent research (on early modern fiction, generic mixture, cosmopolitan postcolonialism and many other aspects touched upon in this book) is frequently missing. The bibliography lists a few online sources from the year 2005; the majority of scholarly publications date from the 1990s and even further back. While this delay explains why scholarly developments of the past decade are not included in the argument, the volume is nevertheless of

interest to critics working in early modern studies. Its particular strength lies in its detailed analyses of various literary texts, above all by Spenser. Schmidt's willingness to put canonical and lesser known works side by side also stands as an example of how early modern studies can (at long last) benefit from the canonical re-shuffling envisioned by various theoretical developments over the past forty years.

Works Cited

- Dolven, Jeff, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
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- Schmidgen, Wolfram, *Exquisite Mixture: The Virtues of Impurity in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).