

Early Modern Literary Studies

**Michele Marrapodi, ed., *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare & his Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
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Michele Marrapodi brings to readers another collection of essays contributing to what is already a substantial body of collaborative work on the cultural influence of Italy in the English literary Renaissance.¹ Marrapodi's scholarly strength is informed by an enthusiastic embrace of Bakhtin's thesis that cultural formation is a dialogic process, evidenced here not only by the content of these essays, but also by the involvement of a wide range of both well-established and emerging scholars in the field whose interests include historicism, gender representation, source criticism, textual editing and performance practice.

Throughout, the collection assists the reader in engaging with previous scholarly work, providing ample footnotes and bibliographical references to important investigations into Anglo-Italian intertextuality and the topical use of Italian locations in English literature. This provides a clear overview of the 'archetypal or seminal legacy' (p. 1) that Italy presented to the rest of Renaissance Europe in the form of political ideas and literary narratives, and surveys what is known about the ways in which this legacy might be transformed by processes of *contaminatio* into what Louise George Clubb has described as 'theatregrams', a recognisable repertoire of Italian tropes circulating in early English drama. In addition to summarising existing approaches, this collection also helps to develop a more nuanced sense of how, over time, writers of dramatic texts self-consciously drew on this repertoire ostensibly to highlight differences between Italy and England but in fact to explore or even to critique their own culture.

¹ For example, *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama* (1993), *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama: Cultural Exchange and Intertextuality* (1988) and *Shakespeare, Italy and Intertextuality* (2004).

The book is organised in three parts. The first part, 'Rewriting Italian Prose and Drama', aims to move beyond traditional source studies to examine how particular Italian sources and tropes could be distilled into tropes ripe for combination through semi-improvisatory stage practice into new dramatic material. The *Commedia dell'Arte* provides here a useful overarching conceptual framework, suggesting ways in which a repertoire of types might be circulated and used creatively to generate new genres. Louise George Clubb's opening essay compares English dramatic compositional method to jazz, reminding readers that Polonius's distinction in *Hamlet* between plays governed by 'the law of writ and the liberty' (*Hamlet* 2.2) refers to a common contemporary distinction between scripted and improvisatory drama. She suggests that this distinction cleared the path for the emergence of pastoral tragicomedy, breaking out of the Aristotelian tragedy-comedy binary of entirely scripted humanist drama: 'the third genre was needed to free and to legitimate fancy' (p. 18). Shakespeare, if not the editors of the first folio, clearly understood that plays like the late romances were breaking new generic ground: 'his methods are an intensified application of the modern Italian technology of ransacking, collection and recombining, adapting and re-costuming from an international repertory within an established framework, a framework in which the pastoral play had assumed a unique and potent position' (p. 25). Essays by Frances K. Barasch on the diabolical Anglo-continental association of harlequin and 'harlotry' in *Henry IV*, by Robert Henke again on the influence of *commedia dell'arte* on *Hamlet*, and by Jill Phillips Ingram on George Gascoigne's alterations to Ariosto's *I Suppositi* productively develop our understanding of the linkage between the English stage and Italian theatre. Ingram's essay is particularly useful in negotiating the gap between drama in performance and as a text, paying attention to the difference between the Italian original and the early printed editions of the English adaptation. Gascoigne's *Supposes*, as printed in the anthology *The Posies* (1575), included marginal notes drawing readers' attention to the various deceptions in the play. This invitation to decipher the trickery, argues Ingram, transforms readers into knowing collaborators (or co-conspirators), tricksters rather than gulls. Also looking at the relationship between text and drama, but from the opposite end of the telescope, Adam Max Cohen, in a thought-provoking if not always absolutely coherent essay, looks at Shakespeare's use of Castiglione's *Cortegiano* as a prototype for Prince Hal's self-refashioning as King Harry, highlighting the tension between heroic character formation and feminised courtly reception contexts. The courtly dialogue is here presented as facilitating new forms of improvised identities. Michele Marrapodi's own contribution is to consider how drama was peculiarly syncretic in its ability to draw on a wide range of Italian sources. As the field leader in new cultural forms, Renaissance Italy provided England with prototypes that could subsequently be combined into a host of new forms. As Anglo-Italian dramatic *contaminatio* became

established practice, argues Marrapodi, it could be used to explore *differences* between the source and target cultural forms. He goes on to examine the implications of transvestism on the English stage, where the use of boy actors impersonating women changed entirely the connotative range available to romance disguises in plays such as *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*; in England, Italianate narratives of transgendered disguise became more radically disruptive in their ideological import.

The essays in the second part of the collection, gathered under the title 'Remaking Italian Myths and Culture', examine how the process of representing Italian political ideas and patterns of behaviour in England created new dramatic models and transformed English literary patterns of thought. Keir Elam's essay explores Shakespeare's fascination with John Florio's work as a mediator of Italian language, exploring the influence of Florio's *First Fruites* (1578), *Second Fruites* (1591) and finally *A World of Words* (1598) not only on the dialogue of plays like *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Twelfth Night* but also an English revision of what Italy and Italian habits of conversation and thought comprised: 'a great deal of the comic energy in Shakespeare's plays derives precisely from the grotesque failure to assimilate Italianate culture as well as the Italian language itself' (p. 105). This dramatic engagement with Italian language as mediated by Florio sets in motion what Elam refers to as an 'interlexical' dialogue (p. 107) between the two cultures that is productive in the new linguistic frame even when the meaning of the original is lost in translation. Clearly the parallels between corrupt and decadent Italian stereotypes fascinated contemporary English audiences; Italian culture was both recognisably foreign, and also uncomfortably familiar in the political and social questions it raised. J. R. Mulryne's essay on *The Merchant of Venice* suggests that this play recirculates known aspects of Venetian ceremonial life, celebrating both the city's opulence but also a contemporary awareness of its commercial fragility and the actual historical tension in the late 1580s between Christian and Jewish communities in the region that mirrored English anxieties about foreign trading communities in its own midst. The play is therefore 'both analogy and documentary' (p. 126). Lisa Hopkins's intricate essay explores how the Machiavellian currents found in *Troilus and Cressida* helped the play to negotiate the gap between the ancient world and the Essex controversy in late Elizabethan politics, with a little help from John Harington's translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: 'Harington's translation of Ariosto could well be seen as combining the cynicism of Machiavelli with the polish of Castiglione' (p. 130). Harington's ironic adaptation of heroic material already rich in distancing manoeuvres opened a space in which a play like *Troilus* might interrogate the potential gap between teaching an elite and delighting many, questions pertinent to the late Elizabethan *poetomachia*. Nina da Vinci Nichols's essay on the *commedia* trope of

master-servant misrecognition in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* might have been better placed in part one of the collection, although its rather digressive structure makes the argument less than entirely clear, but the point does emerge that these plays reshaped existing dramatic tropes in ways that create new English prototypes. Likewise, Jason Lawrence shows that Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604) remodels aspects of Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* (1590) so convincingly that it was Marston who provided Jacobean theatre with an effective blueprint for a new kind of political tragicomedy, one that was urban rather than pastoral.

Part three takes us further into readings that show how the presence of Italy in early English drama might either celebrate or challenge English political ideas, shifting attention from the Italian influence on English literature to the active feedback of this influence into English ideologies, particular ideologies of power and government. John Drakakis's essay on Shakespeare's sustained interest in Venice looks at both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* and asks whether the complex implications of Venetian republican identity might have shifted during the final years of Elizabeth's reign and the beginning of the Jacobean regime. The language of usury pervades both plays, and Drakakis suggests this threatens the incorporated union of disparate parts upon which republican identity is grounded, the tragic vision of *Othello* perhaps hinting at a growing crisis of confidence that disparate elements might be successfully bound together. Claudia Corti's essay on Shakespeare's refashioning of Plutarch's *Coriolanus* at first glance looks rather out of place in this collection, although one might argue that there is an associative connection between humanist fascination in classical republican models and Renaissance Italian political writing (a connection that Corti does not in fact explore). However, Victoria Scala Wood's examination of the Machiavellian politics of *The Tempest* and Michael J. Redmond's consideration of *The Tempest* as a type of Italianate disguised-duke play both show this work's capacity to subvert as much as to celebrate social and political relationships. Finally, Celia R. Daileader's spirited defence of Middleton's gender politics argues that if Middleton's female characters are often flawed, his men are often even more so. Her illuminating comparison with Pietro Aretino's more scurrilous sexual dialogues and poetry shows Middleton's representation of women to be comparatively fair and even sympathetic. Ben Jonson, in comparison, reworked Aretino in the plot of *Epicoene* in ways that made the material even more misogynistic. Criticism of Middleton, argues Daileader, tends to reveal as much about the critic's own attitudes to female sexuality as it does about Middleton: 'there is more danger to women in a Desdemona, a Hero, a Lavinia or a Lucrece than in an army of whores' (p. 237).

The collection is signed off by a final elegant essay by Giorgio Melchiori on ‘polyphonic’ responses to Juliet’s death in *Romeo and Juliet*, providing a musical bookend to a collection that began with Clubb’s jazz analogy. Melchiori compares the first and second quarto editions of the end of Act 4 in this play, arguing that the convergence of lineation, metrics and sound patterns would suggest that speeches by Paris, Capulet, Lady Capulet and the Nurse should be performed simultaneously, in chorus, as a choric yet individuated complaint. Melchiori points out that the Italian madrigal – a multi-voiced musical form for unaccompanied voices – became better known in England following the publication of collections in London in the later 1580s, and suggests that although early play-scripts had yet to develop a recognisable set of conventions for representing simultaneous speech, these might in modern editions be more clearly flagged up. Modern editors, therefore, might like to look at how operatic libretti (opera itself being an emergent Italian form in this period) has developed techniques for printing texts that are sung simultaneously by several characters, weaving together a range of different lyrical responses to dramatic action.

There is much to admire in each part of this book. Perhaps the most useful idea emerging as the sum of these various parts is a sustained sense of English Renaissance culture’s capacity to make new forms by combining elements of existing cultural ideas. Italy, it is clear, provided English dramatic writers, and above all Shakespeare, with an injection of rocket fuel that took the circulation of cultural ideas and energies to new levels of creative innovation.

Works Cited

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