

REVIEWS/RESENHAS

Richard Burt. *Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourse of Censorship*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993

by Craig Bernthal

Richard Burt's book adds another voice to recent studies of censorship in the Renaissance, the most substantial of which belong to Annabel Patterson, Leeds Barroll, and Philip Finkelpearl. Burt's argument is that previous studies have tended to regard censorship "in monolithic, narrow terms, defining it exclusively as a negative exercise of power centered in the court". He describes the work of Annabel Patterson and Philip Finkelpearl as "ahistorical", mainly because it frames the discussion of early modern censorship in terms of free speech vs. censorship — authors attempting, in one way or another, to speak freely and dodge censorship entirely. This is a way of thinking, Burt claims, which did not occur to early modern English playwrights; rather, for them censorship was a given. The issues were only about what form censorship would take; for instance, what criteria would be applied in deciding whether a play would be staged, and who would make a decision?

Burt's immediate goal is to broaden the definition of censorship to include non-court influences that are normally grouped under the heading of criticism. This melding of the two concepts substantially broadens the field of inquiry, which then includes market pressure exerted by audiences and patrons as well as the responses of literary critics like Ben Jonson himself. Censorship, in this formulation, becomes a multi-headed creature which simultaneously barks different directives.

The expansion of the field of inquiry to include criticism is, I believe, an essential step in understanding the many and contradictory pressures operating on early modern playwrights. Burt rightly points out that in early modern England, a "censor" was a critic, that the two concepts were not as distinct as they are now. My reservation is that conflating "criticism" and "censorship" obscures some important distinctions that a present day scholar would need to keep in mind. Audiences and detractors do not put one in jail, cut off hands, or crop one's ears. Criticism is ever present; it is part of the reception of any work of art. Censorship may keep art from being received at all, though of course perceived market preferences can do the same. The degree of repression implied by the word "censorship" is far more extreme than that implied by "criticism."

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These distinctions are obvious, but it is all too easy to lose sight of them once the two words have been conflated. "Criticism", once transformed to "censorship" can be portrayed as something far more sinister and hegemonic than it really is, and this misstep mars the conclusion of Burt's book, when he departs from an examination of the Renaissance and focuses his attention on censorship in the contemporary United States. Here, I have to say, I cannot take censorship within the United States as seriously as Burt. 2 Live Crew, Robert Maplethorpe, and MTV are not in danger of extinction in the USA, *Murphy Brown* continues despite Dan Quayle, and art will survive even if NFA grants disappear entirely. The most explicit pornography is only a touch away on the internet. Newscasts from major network have degenerated into vapid entertainment, but news is available from hundreds of other sources. We are not undergoing a censorship crisis in the United States though it might be exciting to think so.

Burt is interested in Jonson mainly as a "symptom" of Jacobean theater culture a — test case whose experience and texts will demonstrate the complexity of Jacobean and Caroline censorship. At its best, the book does present some fascinating material about Jonson. The central chapters depict a playwright who was often at odds with the court, not because it censored too much but too little, legitimizing theatrical performances which Jonson felt

demeaned the theater. Jonson sometimes used the Master of the Revels' acceptance of his work to argue to audiences that his plays were legitimate, as opposed to work Jonson found licentious. Jonson even attempted to become the Revels Master, but got no nearer than possessing a second reversion of the office. Burt also has interesting things to say about the Revels Office and how it was affected by market forces, licensing plays being far more lucrative to the Master than censoring them. (Most of this material is gleaned from Bentley's, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*.)

The weakest parts of the book are the introduction and conclusion, which tend to get unnecessarily clogged with post-modern critical jargon. The conclusion bills itself as an attempt to understand the current institution of criticism and how it enables certain critiques of early modern (and current) censorship, but it is more a sympathetic review of current Marxist and new leftist positions on censorship, and an outline for another book, a potentially fascinating one. As Burt notes, "a historical account of censorship opens up a critique of the self-censorship (often unconscious) of one's own writing required to make it professionally receivable." I would enjoy hearing what Burton has to say about self-censorship and his own writing, and how university departments and academic presses mold what professors can and cannot get into print. As a younger member of a prestigious university English department, what

constraints did Burton feel on what he could say and how he could say it? More broadly, how many literary critics or scholars with conservative political views get published by Cornell University Press? To what extent have new leftist political views become an academic orthodoxy which cannot be challenged within academia itself? Burt's conclusion seems to promise a book that addresses such questions and I hope he writes it.

Philip Finkelpearl. *Court and Country in the Plays of Fletcher and Beaumont* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990

by Craig Bernthal

This book presents the latest and perhaps definitive installment on an argument Philip Finkelpearl has been making since 1971: that the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher "are not signs of the decadence of Jacobean theater", but rather "plays that comment on the decadence of the ages." Finkelpearl proceeds in a lucidly empirical manner to prove his point, presenting as many "stubborn facts" as he can master in support of his argument, which examines: "the collaborators family backgrounds, their social placement, their friends connections, the influences of their plays and above all the evidence of the plays themselves.

It is refreshing to read someone who still believes in stubborn facts, and Finkelpearl's book is a model of solid scholarship, blessedly free of theoretical flash. His ultimate objective is to spark a reevaluation of Beaumont and Fletcher's work, one that sees their plays as more "significant and attractive than they have been portrayed," particularly in their criticism of the Jacobean court. Finkelpearl's argument is compelling, and in addition, provides a fine general introduction to Beaumont and Fletcher and the situation of Jacobean private theater.

In the first chapter, "Country, the Playhouse, and the Mermaid," Finkelpearl lays out the basic biographical material on Beaumont and Fletcher. He is concerned with establishing that both of their families suffered ill treatment under the Elizabethan regime and in Beaumont's case, also under Jacobean, and that the politics of Fletcher's early patron and Beaumont's neighbor, the Earl of Huntingdon, were notably anti-court. The implication, of course, is that Beaumont and Fletcher would probably have shared the political attitudes of their friends, family, and patrons. This chapter is full of interesting tidbits; not all relate to Finkelpearl's thesis, but all are intriguing. For instance, Finkelpearl argues that Beaumont, as the younger son in a family of well-off country gentry would have inherited little wealth and needed to make his living from the theater as a dedicated professional,

rather than as the amateur some scholars have depicted. Finkelppearl explores Beaumont and Fletcher's relationship with other playwrights, Jonson, Marston, and Massinger. One of his most thought provoking detours examines a little known verse epistle by Beaumont praising how much Shakespeare was able to accomplish though unlearned naturalness; Finkelppearl notes dryly that this is "evidence of the profoundest importance in the Stratfordian argument."

The remaining chapters of the book focus on eight plays, including *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, *The Scornful Lady*, *Philaster*, *A King and No King* and *The Maid Tragedy*. Finkelppearl's discussion of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is especially good: he speculates that "the public's rejection of the *Knight* may have been the costliest mistake in the history of England drama, "because of the remarkable insight into several social classes displayed in the *Knight* and Beaumont's "prescient" understanding of where Puritanism was headed. Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* is evaluated as an aesthetic failure, though a potentially exciting commentary on the licentiousness of Jame's court.

Finkelppearl's thesis gets most of its sustenance from the chapters on *Philaster*, *A King and No King*, and especially *The Maid's Tragedy*. Finkelppearl sees these plays as a trilogy questioning the doctrine right of Kings. In these plays Kingly (or princely)

misconduct is taken to such extremes that obedience to authority should or does become impossible. Finkelppearl argues that Beaumont and Fletcher are satirists of those who would obey at all costs, radical proponents of the idea that regicide is justified when Kings become tyrants.

Finkelppearl's book happily escapes, at times, from the restrictiveness of his thesis. This I think, is due to the breath of Beaumont and Fletcher's work, the difficulty of making generalizations about it, and to Finkelppearl's own adherence to stubborn textual facts. Instead of showing plays that can be distinguished as examination rather than examples of decadence, Finkelppearl's discussion reveals more complexity than his initial dichotomizing allows. Beaumont and Fletcher apparently begin by individually writing *avant-garde* box office failures which are anything but decadent, learn a commercial lesson about their audience, and proceed to "hit" with a truly decadent play, *The Scornful Lady*. They go on to co-author plays which display decadence in the process of examining it, mixing titillation with moral philosophy in a manner difficult to separate. Finkelppearl might have confronted the issue of how mixing prurience with morally grounded satire can become a successful formula for selling tickets. (Here I find myself thinking about Beaumont and Fletcher work in relation to a current crop of American dark comedies: *Pulp Fiction*, *Fargo*, *Two Days in the Valley*, and *Grosse*

Point Blank.) Finklepearl's achievement is that he does reveal the complexity of these plays and takes his readers farther into what he calls that "vast unexplored Amazonian jungle of Jacobean drama": the works of Beaumont and Fletcher.

Julia Briggs. *This STAGE-PLAY WORLD. Texts and Contexts, 1580-1625*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1983, 1997 (new edition).

John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (editors). *A New History of Early English Drama*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997.

Albert H. Tricomi. *Reading Tudor-Stuart Texts through Cultural Historicism*. Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1996.

by Margarida Gandara Rauen

In choosing these three books and reviewing a few selected contents of them, I have certainly done injustice to many authors and other references. I am interested, nevertheless, in considering examples of the complex, fascinating and often contradictory nature of scholarship about 16th and 17th-century English literature and drama.

The preface to the revised edition of Briggs's book stresses the fact that

"Since ... 1983, a great deal of critical attention has focused upon Renaissance texts and the conditions that produced them"(v). As a result, Briggs "rewrote it completely, setting it out rather

differently and adding new chapters on women and the beginnings of colonization"(xiii). This new publication is important, therefore, as an example of the process of methodological transformation that the field of criticism underwent in the last decade. The nine chapters offer comprehensive information about: 1. "Change and Continuity"; 2. "Order and Society"; 3. "Women and the Family"; 4. "Other Peoples, Other Lands"; 5. "The Natural World"; 6. "Religion"; 7. "Education"; 8. "The Court and its Arts"; 9. "The Theatre." I will limit myself to two examples and point out the illuminating relations involving: Spencer's *Shepherd's Calendar* and Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* in the first chapter; Morley, Campion, Sidney and Castiglione's poetry in chapter eight.

What does it mean to be historical? This question is central for Tricomi, whose major objective is "methodological and theoretical: to explore the problem of historical knowledge in relation to the production of literary history and culture" (ix). Drawing on Foucault and addressing the sexual body in particular, Tricomi argues that the new historicism of Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Orgel and others is flawed because of its dichotomic nature, especially for accentuating synchronic readings of culture, as opposed to diachronic ones. Tricomi's indebtedness to Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams is clear when he advocates a historicism that accounts for the fact

that “all human reality is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic” (14), a historicism that is “processual” (15) and accommodates various and competing discourses. *Reading Tudor-Stuart Texts Through Cultural Historicism* has been reviewed by William W. E. Slights in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (vol. 48/3, Fall 1997, 369-371). Slights points out certain limitations in Tricomi’s approach yet strongly recommends the book.

Cox and Kastan’s anthology has three parts and twenty-five essays which challenge, in different ways, commonly held assumptions about early English drama and physical space, social space, and conditions of performance and publication. A foreword by Stephen Greenblatt stresses the complexity of early theater, which he compares to Pieter Brueghel’s painting *Children’s Games* (1560), saying that “it would be virtually impossible to give a single, coherent account of what is happening” (xiii). In their Introduction, Cox and Kastan claim that the book’s “primary aim is to provide the most comprehensive account yet available of early English drama ... and to suggest new lines of inquiry and research” (1). They begin by reflecting upon the term “early” itself, meaning “the beginnings of dramatic performance in England to 1642, when Parliament ordered the theaters closed” (2). Cox and Kastan warn against the bias of historical tags: Early also works to erase the sharp distinction between *Medieval* and

Renaissance that has traditionally been used to mark a period boundary. “Renaissance” scholars have too often posited the “Middle Ages” as a unique cultural phenomenon, thereby reenacting the humanist bias against the prehistory of the renaissance itself, as humanism claimed to invent itself in its rediscovery of classical culture. The culture called “Renaissance” was more continuous than this self-interested narrative allows (3).

Although I urge anyone who is interested in the subject to read this volume immediately, I will consider two essays for the purpose of this short overview. Margreta de Grazia’s philosophical “World Pictures, Modern Periods, and the early Stage” (Chapter 1) definitely unsettles frames of reference that were prestigious and spurred much scholarship in the twentieth-century, such as Tillyard’s: “The notion of an Elizabethan world picture, it must be said, now seems quite odd” (7). Grazia aptly builds her case drawing on Marx, Hegel, Heidegger and Foucault, ultimately suggesting that one must pursue the spatial transformations “beyond their documentary value in the annals of stagecraft [which] is to begin to break out of the limitations of modern epochality and the subjectivity it upholds” (20). She goes on to recall Fredric Jameson:

“It is, perhaps, to follow what Jameson has called the ‘spatial turn’ of the postmodern, an attempt to offset the modern privileging of time over space in order to make sense of contemporary

phenomena that have pushed beyond its pale: multinational capitalism, electronic information networks, virtual realities – all of the simulacral transactions that cannot be sited, pinpointed, or grounded, real as they may be” (20-21).

Chapter 21 presents Peter W.M. Blayney’s “The Publication of Playbooks,” with compelling documentary evidence against what he calls versions of the “Pollard myth” (415), which is at the core of much textual history. Blayney describes, for instance, the supply and demand of plays from 1583 through 1642 and concludes that “Fewer than 21 percent of the plays published in the sixty years under discussion reached a second edition inside nine years ... Not one in twenty would have paid for itself during its first year – so publishing plays would not usually have been seen as a shortcut to wealth” (389). Thus, piracy theories, according to which good actors struggled against greedy stationers, do not make sense. In addition, any relation between the transmission of drama and a great demand for published playtexts is quite unlikely. Blayney covers in detail other important aspects regarding the publishers, varieties of manuscript, acquiring copy, authority, license, entrance, publisher’s costs, expected profits, bookshops and their customers. Still in Cox and Kastan, “The Theater and Literary Culture,” by Barbara A. Mowat (chapter 12), “Touring,” by Peter H. Greenfield (chapter 14),

“Censorship,” by Richard Dutton (chapter 16), “Playwrighting: Authorship and Collaboration,” by Jeffrey Masten (chapter 20), and “Plays in Manuscript,” by Paul Werstine, among the various excellent pieces, provide invaluable state-of-the-art information.