

**"Review of Zachary Lesser *Renaissance drama and the politics of publication: Readings in the English book trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) ISBN 0521842522 xii+244 pp." by Gabriel Egan**

In Renaissance studies it is well known that looking to the writer is not necessarily the best way to understand a play. Rather than attend to individual screenwriters, Hollywood's twentieth-century output can be read via the studios, producers, and directors, and the markets they aimed at and constructed, and so it is with Renaissance drama. Attention has shifted from dramatists to playing companies, beginning with Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean's justly-celebrated *The Queen's Men and their Plays* (1998) and continuing with Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespeare Company* (2004). Zachary Lesser's book, however, is the first to read plays in relation to their early publishers on the principle that these men and women each established a distinctive corpus that should shape our understanding of the constituent plays.

Lesser reads the corpora of four publishers, Walter Burre, Nicholas Vavasour, Thomas Archer, and Thomas Walkley, and the argument he makes for his methodology is as important as the readings themselves. In chapter 1 ('Speculation in the book trade') Lesser traces the particularities of printing, publishing, and bookselling that explain why the publishers and booksellers came to dominate the London Stationers' Company and why even more than booksellers the publishers tended to specialize in particular genres. Qualifying the widely-cited view of Peter W. M. Blayney, Lesser shows that printing plays was not as risky as we have thought (their reprinting rates were above the industry average) and the company rules to stop one publisher producing a book that would hurt the sales of an existing book had the effect of promoting publisher specialization (that is, becoming known for publishing books of a particular kind), which effect was to everyone's advantage. Lesser's combination of logic and historical detail is compelling, and the only (minor) weakness of his narrative is a use of the word 'commodity' that implies a Marxist outlook--the book *Capital* gets cited, for example--that weakens the argument. In a strictly *Marxist* sense, one example of a commodity is indistinguishable from another, and while booksellers might sometimes tend towards this view (swapping one batch of books for another, by weight or by sheets) the publishers, Lesser insists, did not. That Lesser's sense of a commodity is not actually the Marxist one is clear from his assertion that "It is in the nature of commodities that anyone who has the money can buy them" (p. 154). That's not true. One of the essential mysteries of a commodity (why Marx called them 'hieroglyphs') is that although Brent crude oil is currently \$38 a barrel, my \$38 can't buy one.

This quibble notwithstanding, Lesser's argument that specialization helped author finds publishers likely to take their work, and helped publishers develop the discrimination to take only what would sell, is compelling and well supported. Put to work on play readings, the principle pays off handsomely in refocussing our attention. The first edition of Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* was published in 1613 with an epistle from the publisher claiming that theatre audience "utterly rejected it", and as Lesser observes it is a wonder that no-one working on the play has thought to ask themselves why, in that case, Burre published it at all. Lesser's answer is that Burre specialized in plays that audiences had disliked because he catered to those who fancied themselves as particularly

discriminating readers. The case of Vavasour's 1633 edition (the first) of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* also starts with a neglected question: why was this 40-year old play suddenly marketable then? Lesser's answer is that contemporary debates about the future of English Protestantism--the struggle between those who wanted further reformation and those who supported archbishop Laud's reintroduction of ritualism--allowed Vavasour to market Barabas as a composite Jew-Puritan-Muslim figure, undermining the cohesion of Christian society. As with Burre, Lesser's method is to read across the corpus of Vavasour publications, and he finds in Richard Brome's *The Northern Lass* (1632), Samuel Rowley's (or is it Thomas Dekker's?) *The Noble Spanish Soldier* (1634), and Dekker's *The Wonder of the Kingdom* (1636) a consistently Laudian way of seeing the world, especially regarding the danger--exemplified by the 30 Years' War--of different Christianities being at one another's throats.

Lesser shows that Burre and Vavasour's corpora each took a particular, monologic line, but Archer seemed able to publish on both sides of the *querelle des femmes*, producing Joseph Swetnam's *Arraignement of . . . Women* (1615) but also Rachel Speght's response *A Mousell for Melastomus* (1617). Class explains why: Speght's book was less a volley in the *querelle* (as would cite cases of good women to refute Swetnam) than a form of marriage manual, citing scripture for an argument about gender equality. Such piety deflected the charge that a woman became immodest by publishing her thoughts, and Speght combined this with a claim to save readers from Swetnam's vulgarity. Marriage conduct books told men that they would be judged by their wives' behaviour: if craven, the man would be taken for a tyrant, and if brazen the man would be perceived as too mild. Casting her book in this mould, Speght set men the task of treading a fine line between patriarch and tyrant and thus she was at one (liberal) end of the spectrum and placed Swetnam at the (laughably illiberal) opposite end, each aware of and dependent upon the other. Constructing Swetnam and his readers this way allowed Archer's buyers to look down upon and enjoy lighthearted vicarious wife-beating fun amongst the lower orders. This "safe danger" Lesser also sees in the thrillingly transgressive (but ultimately contained-by-marriage) plots of Dekker's *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1607) and *The Roaring Girl* (1611), John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), and John Marston's *The Insatiate Countess* (1613).

The last case study, Thomas Walkley, is the most complex and at twice the length of the others it unbalances the book somewhat. Essentially, and at too great a length, Lesser establishes that Walkley specialized in books about stately affairs, especially the desirability of king James's son marrying the Spanish Infanta and of keeping England out of the 30 Years' War. Lesser's readings of Francis Beaumont's *A King and No King* (1619) and Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Philaster* (1620) are admirably erudite about the drama and also the title-page pictures that Walkley commissioned for publication, which articulate subtly different (and contemporarily significant) messages. Whereas in the 1630s the Laudians wanted a crusade to unite Christianity, in the 1620s extreme Protestants wanted a war on Catholicism, and in this context the hero of Walkley's 1622 edition of *Othello* is dangerously unreliable. Not a knight but a mercenary fulfilling a paid-for service to the state, Othello's self-antagonism derives from failing in his attempt to suture the gap between the ideals of chivalry (he woos for a world of kisses and dies upon one) and the realities of modern warfare. In the play the domestic matter of Othello's marriage

is also a matter of state, and so too the most urgent English matter of state in 1622 was the proposed Spanish (indeed, Moorish) match.

Lesser's book provides four wholly new contexts for familiar plays, and the readings of and from the book trade are entirely persuasive. Perhaps inevitably the plan quarters the work, but Lesser strives to link the elements, for example by contrasting his first two cases' monologic with his third's dialogic corpus. The splendid essay (chapter 1) on the causes of publisher specialization not only introduces his method brilliantly but also is a vigorous and fully self-contained introduction to the book-trade in general, and could usefully be given to graduate students on its own. The book is not so well rounded off, however, by a five-page 'epilogue' that warns us not to confuse publishers' attempts to construct and shape their markets (and their readers' opinions) for those markets (and opinions) themselves; something more substantial seems wanting. This is a minor point, however, and this splendid study of the trade in printed plays--underpinned with scrupulous and copious documentation--deserves a very wide readership of its own. Adopting Lesser's own critical lenses, we might note that coming after landmark books on Renaissance play publishing by Andrew Murphy and especially Lukas Erne, this book shows that the university press of Cambridge currently has this exciting field virtually to itself.