



Anna Bayman, Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in
Early Modern London

Anna Bayman. *Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London*. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014. viii, 160 p. ISBN 9780754661733. £65.00 (hardcover).

When the dramatist and pamphleteer Thomas Dekker wanted to take the temperature of London's Jacobean book trade, he had the steeple of St Paul's Cathedral itself survey the activities conducted below in its churchyard: "at one time, in one and the same ranke, yea, foote by foote, and elbow by elbow, shall you see walking, the Knight, the Gull, the Gallant, the upstart, the Gentleman, the Clowne, the Captaine, the Appel-squire, the Lawyer, the Usurer, the Citizen ... the Scholler, the Begger, the Doctor, the Ideot, the Ruffian, the Cheater, the Puritan, the Cut throat ... the Law-man, the True-man, and the Thiefe, of all trades and professions some, and of all Countreys some." While the building itself was aghast at the heedless pursuit of economic interests, the promiscuous mixing of social classes and nationalities taking place in its environs, the pamphlet in which this extravagant prosopopoeia first saw print, Dekker's *Dead Tearm* (1608), drew its lifeblood from such eclectic company.

As Anna Bayman shows in this insightful and eloquent study of Dekker's relationships with London's burgeoning trade in cheap print, Dekker's pamphlets made their way in the world by remaining open to the multiple perspectives, voices and interests of a diverse body of metropolitan readers. Bayman suggests that this multivocality and a willingness to entertain apparently discordant positions was one of the most enduring lessons that Dekker learned from his early career writing for the stage. (He was involved in the authorship of around 50 plays before 1603, when plague forced him to seek writing income from other sources.)

Bayman only makes this point in passing since she largely avoids Dekker's theatrical output in favour of a focus on his printed prose and verse. The book begins by surveying the cultural and bibliographic status of pamphlets in seventeenth-century London. The second chapter narrows the focus to study Dekker's place within Jacobean book trade and patronage networks, putting him in the company of a kindred of dramatist-pamphleteers like Thomas Middleton as well as printers and publishers such as Nathaniel Butter and William Ferbrand. The final three chapters analyse Dekker's anatomisation of London as an enthralling commercial and recreational centre as well as sink of sin and vice. Bayman scrutinises Dekker's construction of stock characters such as gulls and rogues in detail to argue that he was sensitively attuned to the performativity of civic and moral identities, "exposing the rules according to which [London] operated" (115) for readers who were encouraged to know and



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appreciate the metropolis rather than be terrified by it. The final chapter considers the politico-religious dimension of Dekker's pamphleteering, demonstrating his preference for peace following the accession of James I—excepting a brief period of belligerence immediately after the Gunpowder Plot. What was unique about Dekker's perspective on such matters, and distinguished him from courtly writers or those associated with the civic elite, was his emphasis on the connection between peace and the “benefits of trade ... for the melting pot of individuals who ... flourished on the trickling down of the prosperity of the merchant and courtly elites” (144).

There are plenty of highlights in this book. The introductory work on pamphlet retail pricing is acute and nuanced, and offers a welcome corrective to a prevailing assumption that the cost of an unbound book was equivalent to the price of admission to an outdoor theatre. Bayman shows that a “fair-length” pamphlet of 48 pages could cost 4d and was thus more expensive than public open-air playhouses where the cheapest entry was 1d (28-29). Likewise, the bibliographic work with Dekker's *Four Birds* is a treat, revealing how the author's migration from preferred quarto to octavo format mirrored a rhetorical move to the quiet piety of a prayerbook (128).

However, the business of rhetoric, technique and style is not nearly so well handled as the bibliographic analysis. We are repeatedly asked to take apparently revealing things about Dekker's characteristic style on trust; attribution of works to Dekker are asserted because they are “characteristically verbose” (127) and “wholly in keeping with Dekker's style” (21), or how “in stylistic terms [particular pamphlets] could certainly be his” (120). There is, however, no sustained analysis of the specifically literary and rhetorical techniques that Dekker deployed to distinguish himself from other pamphleteers in this competitive and crowded marketplace. It really is very surprising, too, that a book so sharp on bibliography should fail to provide one. Given the notoriously difficult business of attributing anonymous pamphlets, it would have been extremely useful to see a list of primary works confidently attributed to Dekker as sole author alongside co-authored pieces and those of uncertain authorship. These, though, are lacunae in an otherwise fascinating study which will be of interest to all students of the pamphlet culture of early modern England.

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