

Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London

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As Anna Bayman notes in her excellent new monograph, '[a] book about Thomas Dekker could [...] be a book about almost anything' (p. 3). Tackling this prolific and somewhat elusive writer brings with it a host of difficulties. Dekker's writings are generically and formally diverse, embedded within the political and moral concerns of early modern London. Bayman's book is an important new consideration of how Dekker's work drew upon, and acted on, the spaces and concerns of the city he lived in and the print market in which he took part.

Dekker first came to prominence as a writer for the stage in the late years of the 16th century, and it is as a playwright that he is most frequently remembered today; the profile of his dramatic work received a recent boost with the 2014 Royal Shakespeare Company production of his most famous work, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. However, his work for the theatre was interrupted in 1603, when the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne was accompanied by a devastating outbreak of plague. With the theatres closed, it appears that Dekker turned towards pamphleteering as a means of financial support. Over the next two decades he produced pamphlets as well as continuing to write for the stage; '[h]is subject matter ranged from early modern London, prisons, plague, and rogues, to wars, poverty, social structures, Catholics, and migration' (p. 3).

Unlike many of his more openly polemical contemporaries, Dekker isn't easy to characterise generically or politically. 'Of all English poets, if not of all poets on record,' Swinburne wrote in 1908, 'Dekker is perhaps most difficult to classify'.⁽¹⁾ Attempts to assign him to a specific political or theological position, such as Julia Gaspar's assessment of him as a militant Protestant, sometimes fail to account for how much his the positions he takes in his writing shift in response to contemporary events.⁽²⁾ It is difficult to find a clear 'line through' to his work. This is not least because so much of it is missing: a great deal of his collaborative dramatic work is known through references in Philip Henslowe's 'Diary' and other contemporary sources. More fundamentally, however, Dekker's writing is reactive and changeable. It challenges classification: even while approaching self-portrait (as in 1620's *Dekker His Dreame*), a sense of exactly who he was, what his beliefs or experiences or even his particular literary style might be, continually recedes. Dekker's willingness to respond to the shifts of the marketplace has meant that much of the critical reception of

Dekker's work might be characterised by Ben Jonson's portrayal of Dekker as the hack writer Demetrius Fannius in *Poetaster* (1601). *Poetaster*'s version of Dekker – an amoral, slanderous scribbler – has echoes in a somewhat patronising attitude taken to his work by early critics, perhaps most clearly expressed in Swinburne's explication of the difficulty of classifying his writing: 'the grace and delicacy, the sweetness and spontaneity of [Dekker's] genius are not more obvious and undeniable than the many defects which impair and the crowning deficiency which degrades it'.⁽³⁾

Bayman limits her study of Dekker by medium, concentrating on his pamphlets. This choice in itself makes a powerful critical point. Dekker's pamphlets have often been seen as of lesser literary merit than his dramatic writing, even by those critics who have argued for the literary value of his work. The author of Dekker's *ODNB* entry, John Twynning, writes of the pamphlets that 'much of the writing was produced in haste, which often had deleterious effects on its literary merit'.⁽⁴⁾ Twynning is among recent critics who have challenged the view of Dekker as a 'Demetrius Fannius', arguing instead for the depth of his social and religious commentary. However, as Bayman astutely observes, this approach misses, or at least undervalues, the ways in which Dekker's 'sense of what his works might have meant to his readers, and how they might have acted upon those readers, was grounded in his consciousness of the processes through which they passed, from investment to consumption' (p. 13). Twynning's assessment of the pamphlets rests on notions of literary merit that Bayman's market-centred approach rejects. Her book is not a rehabilitation of Dekker's pamphlet writing from the assessments of unimpressed literary critics, because she doesn't engage with terms of literary value. Bayman delineates Dekker's interactions with the London print market not in order to criticise his commercial-minded writing but to shed light on both writer and context. Bayman's Dekker is a man in a marketplace, doing his damndest to make a living via any literary means he can. At the same time, he also demonstrates a subtle, self-referential sense of the possibilities of print.

Bayman's focus on these mercurial texts is not only a means of dealing with the multifaceted Dekker: as her title indicates, this is as much a book about a particular form of culture as it is a book about a particular writer's forays in it. By 'the culture of pamphleteering' Bayman means both the means by which printed pamphlets were produced, retailed, distributed and consumed, and the religious, civic and political contexts with which pamphlets interacted. Bayman pays particular attention to the capacity of pamphlets to intervene in and even shape social and political debates, arguing that 'the distinctive qualities of pamphleteering permitted it to act in peculiarly effective ways on its environment and readers' (p. 1). This focus places her within a growing field of investigation. In recent years, the early modern pamphlet market has been the subject of a number of studies aimed at recovering the material forms, reading practices, and socio-political impact of these texts, as well as the networks by which they were distributed. Joad Raymond's *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* is clearly a major influence on Bayman's work. Bayman also draws on Alexandra Halasz's analysis of the social and political functions of pamphlets in *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* ⁽⁵⁾, but moves away from a Habermasian approach towards a more fragmented, diverse, and commercially-inflected idea of 'publicity'. Bayman is less concerned with the emergence and formation of a 'public sphere' than with the commercial and representational strategies by which a 'public' could be constructed, selected, and sold things.

Perhaps the most immediate critical counterpart to Bayman's book is the first volume of *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (edited by Raymond), published in 2011, to which Bayman contributed a chapter on 'Printing, learned, and the unlearned'. It is instructive to read *Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London* in relation to this volume, and especially to Raymond's call in its introduction to interpret early modern print culture 'in terms of the whole cloth of experiences and activities with and around books'.⁽⁶⁾ Bayman takes what might be described as a 'whole cloth' approach to Dekker's pamphlets and their contexts.

This is particularly the case in the opening two chapters, both of which focus on pamphlets as a literary and material form. The first, 'The pamphlets in London', is an admirably clear guide to London's labyrinthine and self-conscious pamphlet market. Bayman moves sure-footedly through the various stages of pamphlet

production and distribution, shedding welcome light on aspects that are sometimes skated over in critical accounts of early modern print. For example, her section on the reprinting and revision of pamphlets is particularly helpful regarding the variety of ways in which pamphlet text could be reused and repurposed. Similarly, her analysis of pamphlet circulation makes strong use of diverse evidence. The section on 'Reading pamphlets' is rather short, and focuses on the concerns of writers regarding how their works might have been interpreted by 'so many men, so many minds'; this part might have benefited from some further consideration of reader reception.[\(7\)](#)

The second chapter, 'Debts of various kinds: Dekker's relationships', is perhaps misnamed – most of the relationships in question are those between writers, and between writers and stationers, and for much of the chapter there is little especial prioritisation of Dekker's specific links, whether professional or personal. It does, however, provide an interesting guide to the literary world, which works as a useful counterpart to the focus on the physical production and distribution of texts in the previous chapter. Bayman's third chapter, "'The eares brothell': Dekker's London", delineates a third related context: the city within which Dekker operated, and which was a frequent, and frequently central, topic of his pamphlets. Again, Bayman marshalls a wide range of sources deftly, examining both the city's physical spaces and the economic and cultural processes that took place within and around them.

Taken together, these three chapters offer a fascinating introduction to the practicalities of pamphlet printing and its place in early modern London, as well as bringing together the different significations of 'pamphlet' – physical, economic, ideological, and symbolic. This wider focus is necessary to Bayman's analysis: as she argues, Dekker's pamphlet publications are rooted in the urban print market, and so a detailed sense of its contours is essential when approaching Dekker's work in more detail later in the book. Bayman mentions in her acknowledgements that this monograph developed from her doctoral thesis on Jacobean pamphleteering, a lineage which is most apparent in these early chapters. For the most part, this manifests as the pleasing sense that there is a sizeable weight of knowledge and research behind each assertion and example. However, those who come to this book specifically in search of Dekker may chafe at the amount of time spent on other writers and figures in the book trade. Conversely, and perhaps more significantly, the fact that this is a book specifically about Dekker might mean that readers looking for a good general introduction to the early modern pamphlet trade don't find it – which would be a shame, as these chapters function very well in this capacity.

Bayman's latter two chapters turn to specific features of Dekker's work. Bayman identifies two key topics in the pamphlets, both of which centre on issues that threaten the urban community. Chapter four deals with the 'Vice, folly, and rogues' that populate his London. This chapter is especially successful in drawing together the various threads of context that Bayman has described in previous chapters, and applying them to Dekker's texts through sensitive close-reading: Bayman's subtle reading of *The Guls Horne-Book* is one of the book's highlights.

The fifth chapter, 'Sin, plague, and the politics of peace', focuses on crises in the urban commonwealth – including the crisis that appears to have prompted Dekker to start pamphleteering in the first place. Bayman moves from analysis of Dekker's 'plague pamphlets' of 1603 (including *The Wonderfull Yeare* and *Newes from Gravesend*) to his pamphlet writing of the 1620s and 1630s, drawing Dekker's earlier pamphlets into fruitful dialogue with his later work. Crucially, she emphasises the religious dimensions of these texts, connecting Dekker's depictions of disaster to key theological and ecclesiastical debates over confessional difference and the workings of salvation. This focus brings Bayman into fruitful debate with the work of Gaspar; in contrast to Gaspar's reading of Dekker's works as explicitly Calvinist, Bayman argues that the theological positions articulated in his pamphlets were shifting, multi-vocal, and tied to the concerns of cheap print. Bayman's case here is persuasive. She draws out unorthodox, tolerant, and anti-Calvinist features in Dekker's pamphlets, but nonetheless argues that he avoids theological controversy: his pamphlets are primarily concerned with the nature and outcomes of earthly sin, in particular those sins that affect the spiritual or economic health of London.

The latter part of this chapter deals, as the title indicates, with matters of war and peace: in particular the build-up to and aftermath of James's treaty with Spain in 1604, and the breaking of this peace in the 1620s in the early years of the Thirty Years' War. Bayman argues that Dekker's engagement with these issues is markedly less hawkish than his pamphleteering peers. Her analysis here could do with some further examination of this context; in particular, a more detailed picture of the anti-Catholic rhetoric employed in other 1620s pamphlets would bolster her points about the ways in which Dekker diverges from the positions argued for and the language used by other pamphleteers. This chapter sees the boldest and most politically resonant articulation of Bayman's thesis. She interprets the multiplicity of the theological and political views expressed in Dekker's pamphlets – his 'preference to incorporate and appeal to multiple, even mutually incompatible, viewpoints' – as evidence of his close connection with 'the gallimaufry of voices and opinions circulating in the early modern city' (pp. 145, 147). This approach allowed 'enabled him to articulate the socio-political views' of urban readers:

those who – disenfranchised from formal politics and excluded from the privileges of the commercial elites, but sharing an interest in the commercial success that those elites controlled and in which they invested – were very likely to have mixed feelings about the ways in which government and trade were practised. (p. 145)

As in Bayman's first chapter, some greater attention to the responses of individual readers would be welcome here. Bayman gives no direct evidence of readers reacting to Dekker's texts, which in itself is neither surprising nor a flaw: recovering how and why early modern people read, and what they made of specific texts they encountered, is an activity that sits somewhere between 'tricky' and 'a fool's errand' on any scale of scholarly difficulty. Evidence of reading might be recovered from marginal notes, as in Gabriel Harvey's reading of Livy discussed by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, or the multiple cases described by William Sherman in *Used Books*. It might come from commonplace books, as in Kevin Sharpe's analysis of the reading practices of Sir William Drake in *Reading Revolutions*, or even from the records of the Inquisition, as in Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*.⁽⁸⁾ However, for every Livy, or Drake, or Menocchio (Ginzburg's Friulian miller), there were hundreds or thousands of readers who are unknown and unrecoverable, who left no traces of how they read or where or why, whose copies of the texts they read may well no longer survive. Moreover, as the critics cited above recognise, the reading traces we can find are specific to particular contexts and moments of 'action', and are evidence of writing, or speaking, rather than reading. Bayman's analysis doesn't necessarily require, and may well not even have benefited from, evidence that a specific reader of Dekker underlined a particular passage. However, her identification of Dekker's writing so closely with the views of his readership needs some further examination. While the instability of Dekker's writing may well be especially suited the cacophonous and multi-vocal early modern city, the multiple, ungovernable nature of pamphlet readerships must surely allow for readings that were dismissive, or hostile, or uncomprehending, or simply uninterested.

This should not take away, however, from the value and quality of Bayman's work. *Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London* is both a useful reconsideration of an underexamined writer and an investigation of how that writer – representative, in some ways, of wider trends, while in some ways quite unusual – sits within a complex patchwork of actors, events, and market forces. Through this, Bayman offers a vibrant account of a print-centred public sphere 'structured – emphatically not "corrupted" – by commercial concerns' (p. 149). The result is a highly readable study, with important implications for critical understanding of 'popular print' and the cultures with which it interacted.

Notes

1. A. C. Swinburne, 'Thomas Dekker', in *The Age of Shakespeare* (London, 1908), pp. 60–109 (p. 60). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Gaspar, *The Dragon and the Dove: The Plays of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford, 1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Swinburne, p. 60.[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. J. Twyning, 'Dekker, Thomas (c.1572–1632)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online version January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7428>> [2] [accessed 9 Nov 2014].[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003); Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. J. Raymond, 'Introduction: the origins of popular print culture', in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Vol.1: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. Raymond (Oxford, 2011), pp. 1–14 (p. 14).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. S. R[id], *Martin Mark-All, Beadle of Bridewell: His Defence and Answere to the Belman of London* (London, 1610), sig. A2v.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. A. Grafton and L. Jardine, "'Studied for Action": how Gabriel Harvey read his Livy', *Past & Present*, 129 (November 1990), 30–78. W. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007); K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2000); C. Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (trans. by J. and A. Tedeschi) (Baltimore, MD, 1980).[Back to \(8\)](#)
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