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T. F. Wharton, eds

The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-visions

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 233p.

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As T. F. Wharton points out in his informative and highly readable introduction to this book, Shakespeare's dramatic contemporary John Marston behaved badly, challenging the censor and his rivals, but was nonetheless admired as a true wit. It seems unfair then that Marston has subsequently been criticised for his lack of 'moral vision' or else neglected. This collection of essays by international scholars endeavours to redress the balance. Of particular interest are essays by Rick Bowers, Janet Clare, W. E. Slights, Sukanya B. Senapati, and Kiernan Ryan. The dominant concerns are market forces, gender, and politics in the context of Marston's essentially post-modern slipperiness. Bowers consider Marston to have been responsive to commercial demands but on his own terms, using irony to unsettle audience expectation. Clare continues her work on censorship, arguing that Marston was less prepared than his contemporaries to accept state control, and she identifies challenges to monarchical authority in his work. Slights, Senapati, and Ryan focus on gender but disagree about the degree of control effected by Marston. Homo-social bonding, male hysteria, and strong female voices are explored in essays of the subtle complexity which Marston's works have long deserved but hitherto seldom received. Michael Scott closes the collection with a demand that the theatre establishment show more courage by producing Marston's plays alongside the classics. This book will further appreciation of Marston's work, but via professional scholars, at whom it is aimed, rather than directly amongst their undergraduates. This is largely to do with market forces, with which Marston was too familiar, and Penguin's decision to pull out of a planned original-spelling edition of Marston's works (p. 3) typifies a prophecy of marginality creating the conditions for its own fulfilment.

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