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Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose
Fiction (review)

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(Review)

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and suggestive leads. The most important of these, I think, is his questioning of whether we might regard the relation of English imitators to their classical sources as “postcolonial” (78). Yet this is a project of literary recovery, and there is a lack of interest in exploring the implications of this perceived relation. A recent study which does so, and which compares with and supplements this book in interesting ways, is Neil Rhodes’s, *Shakespeare and the Origins of English* (2004). Exploring the implications of this matters more than Keilen might allow, since the redefinition of England’s relationship with ancient and modern Rome coincides with what is generally recognized as the beginning of the English imperial project. A study a little less interested in establishing the autonomy of the literary text would have a lot more to say about this.

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Steve Mentz. *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. x + 262. index. bibl. \$89.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5469-9.

Steve Mentz concludes his engaging new study of Elizabethan fiction with the lament and promise that “prose fiction has long been the ignored little sibling of drama and verse in [English] Renaissance studies,” but that the time has come to “rescue Greene from his deathbed and transform him into a wandering spirit of prose fiction” because of his seminal role in the rise of “middlebrow” writing in the 1580s and 90s — a print-culture phenomenon that simultaneously aligned itself with the ethos of the age and, for the censorious, threatened to destabilize both tastes and morals. I can only hope his words are prophetic, being an editorial champion of this neglected genre.

The most admirable yet risky dimension of this book is its decisive claim about where the revolution in the writing of the 1580s came from, and how one model in particular lifted that writing clear of the blighted formulae of the chivalric romance and the cynicism of the Italian novella, and thereby ensconced it more directly in the approving hearts of a demanding readership who voted on their pleasures and moral tolerances with their purses. The critical moment was the rediscovery by a mercenary soldier in Budapest in 1526 of a manuscript of Heliodorus’s *Aethiopian History*. In short, this was the work which taught writers of Greene’s generation how to design plots and, within those end-oriented plots, how to develop characters with implicit interiors who lived out their trials of love and adventure in pseudohistorical geographical settings on the darkling moral plains of chance and Providence; there the reigning virtues are patience and blank hope in conjunction with a calculated collaboration with destiny, a collaboration that enables characters to survive shipwreck, attempted rape, and separation from loved ones until, through the mysteries of episodic narrative design, the long-delayed deliverances and rewards in marriage come to pass. Mentz tells the story

of Heliodoran influence passionately and well, as these features work their way incompletely into the elite writing of Sidney, and more fully into the middlebrow early romances of Greene, only to be compromised and frittered away, even as a working legacy of design and content, in the experimental efforts of Lodge and Nashe. Would that such a thesis could be so dialectically forthright and neat. But the virtue of Mentz's study is that his intellectual acumen compels him to deal openly with some of the messiness that inevitably arises.

There is a substantial section to reckon with, as well, in which Melanchthon's notions of faith and obedience to the will of God in anticipation of heavenly rewards is drawn into parallel with the Heliodoran treatment of patience and passivity as a prerequisite to narrative salvation — as though they belong to a common *mentalité*, one in which “characters facilitate providence's completion of their story.” The matter of faith and passivity results in a new form of agency in which conspiring with destiny is deemed the bedrock of the Christian-Heliodoran — and hence the collective Elizabethan middlebrow — mindset. Thereafter, we find ourselves in a discussion of the four theological responses to the Reformation, from the anti-Presbyterian to the proto-Arminian, which in turn form the basis for a hermeneutic approach, first to Sidney as the quintessential Protestant writer who is presumed to have brought all the weight of his philosophical and religious mind into the emblematics of his fiction, and then to Lodge as the quintessential Catholic who brought all the force of his penitence culture to his stories of reformed devils from Saladyne to Arsadachus — disallowing that Greene was equally involved in penitence literature during the last years of his career. It is all a challenging and mind-stimulating discussion.

Mentz's reading of Lodge is sometimes excellent, but that “*A Margarite . . .* rejects Elizabethan-Heliodoran prose romance for a tragic reinterpretation of Iberian chivalry” would require pages to disentangle. Why “Iberian chivalry”? To be sure, it is a truncated romance, insofar as revenge slaughter replaces union and escape. But the Heliodoran design is still evident, the heroine is the epitome of passive virtue, constancy and patience, the novella has little part in it, and the setting derives from the romance world at the fringes of Eastern Europe, between Mosco and Arcadia. It is not Mentz's fault that the title has misled so many into thinking that this work in any way pertains to America; Lodge merely purports to have brought it back with him from a source, not necessarily Iberian, that he found in Santos. But that Arsadachus is some sort of Incan or conquistador is unlikely in light of Margarita's walk from Mosco to Cusco. I cannot see that this work is “typing Catholic vice as a feature of New World Spanish society,” which in turn fits but obliquely with Lodge's Catholic sensibilities — but these are details.

The study ends with what I take to be an excellent commentary on Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveler* against the background of diverse and contradictory critical traditions, as well as a useful survey of the polemics written in the 1590s over the death of Greene, and of all that is implied about audiences, authors, and the rise of commercial publication. The complexity of the thesis makes for some challenging passages, leaving impressions here and there that the qualifiers and

counterarguments have done some damage to the principal thesis; there are odd contradictions. But the major themes are worth the pondering, for the forces involved in the shaping of prose fiction of those volatile decades were themselves multiple and contradictory.

In sum, this book is a valiant production, full of interesting detail, arresting in its novelty, comprehensive in the scope of the background reading, and worth the consideration of all students of early prose fiction. One can only hope that in making a contribution to the growing number of critical studies on the Lyly-to-Nashe axis, the axis itself will continue to gain in status among students of Renaissance literature.

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Katharine Wilson. *Fictions of Authorship in Late Elizabethan Narratives: Euphues in Arcadia*.

Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 186 pp. index. bibl. \$74. ISBN: 0-19-925253-X.

Popular prose fiction of the Elizabethan period has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Katharine Wilson's *Fictions of Authorship* aims to extend this emphasis by exploring the representations of authorship and textual transmission within Elizabethan popular fiction. As her introduction explains, "[t]he 'fictions of authorship' of my title refers to the way authors marked out ideas about writing within their novels, often through the creation of writers and readers within the text." She argues that the repetition of this theme is an indication of the "growing disenchantment with the romance" experienced by this new breed of popular writers, and of their "own uncertainty about the role of prose fiction" (4).

Wilson begins with the flurry of textual exchange that constitutes George Gascoigne's *Discourse of the Adventures passed by Master F. J.*, in which letters, poetry, and narratives continuously change hands. The chapter then proceeds to show how Gascoigne's own literary manoeuvres are appropriated by writers like Whetstone, Grange, and Gabriel Harvey, all of whom produce stories as "tribute[s] to the compulsive fascination of the story of F. J. and the games which could be played with it" (32). While the unstable nature of texts and textual exchange in Gascoigne's *Master F. J.* has been explored in detail previously by critics such as Constance Relihan and Susan Staub, it is Wilson's account of Harvey's unpublished narrative, "A noble mans sute to a cuntrie maide," which is bound to attract readers' attention with its delineation of the complicated literary ventriloquism through which the married "Milord" and Harvey's sister "Mercy" requisition Harvey's erudite persona to function as an involuntary "secretary" in their exchange of missives.

Chapter 2 introduces Lyly's archetypal Renaissance wit, Euphues. Wilson argues that Lyly's hero shares a significant trait with the protagonists of Gascoigne