Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare (review)

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Parergon, Volume 26, Number 1, 2009, pp. 230-232 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.0.0121

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him. Hamrick also discovers in the sonnet sequence’s allegory, the use of the ‘Catholic imaginary to assert the possibility of being both Catholic and loyal to Queen Elizabeth’ (p. 153). This seemingly oxymoronic identity functions as an apology for the Earl of Oxford’s apostasy. It indicates that he is only briefly involved in Catholic causes harmful to the Queen. Watson’s religio-political allegory maintains that Oxford’s conversion to Catholicism does not include violent actions against the Queen. Hamrick’s discussion is enhanced by drawing on historical material from the 1570s and early 1580s, including Oxford’s own poetry published in *Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576).

In conclusion, Hamrick restates the importance of Catholicism to his study of Elizabethan love poetry, and its continual influence on Elizabethan readers. His reflection also identifies the complexities of Elizabethan culture entangled within the competing Catholic and Protestant ideologies. The book ends with an analysis of ‘Sonnet 5’ of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* to illustrate how the Petrarchan representation of the Elizabethan Catholic imaginary is continually used as a critique of Queen Elizabeth. This is because she adapted the same Catholic language and imagery to create her powerful identity as the Virgin Queen.

Hamrick’s book is an important and original contribution to the understanding of early court culture in Elizabeth’s reign. It is stronger, however, on reconstructing Elizabethan religious and political history than close reading of the poetry. Despite this, the book is a well-researched, exhaustively argued, highly readable and challenging scholarly work. It is essential to both academics and students interested in early Elizabethan Petrarchan poetry, and the religio-political context of the Reformation.

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Jonathan Gil Harris’ new book challenges Early Modern scholars to reconsider the temporality of objects and the agency of seemingly inanimate objects. As Harris notes, much New Historicist criticism in the new millennium focuses on material objects, but does not understand those objects in any significantly
new fashion. Instead, such readings adhere to older conceptions of time as a one-way street, stressing the strangeness of early modern objects only to reinforce our sense of the past’s alterity, its radical difference to us today. However, as Harris convincingly argues, such approaches do not sufficiently account for ‘the time of the thing’ (p. 2) because they focus on the passive form of objects and do not conceive of matters as ‘untimely’ – that is, as potentially active and disruptive.

Drawing on the work of Michel Serres, Harris distinguishes between three ways of theorising temporality: the logic of supersession, which regards time as a series of events replacing one another in a linear, synchronic fashion; the logic of explosion, in which the old shatters present-day illusions of wholeness and universality; and the logic of conjunction, which understands temporality as an active process in which old and new collaborate. We might think of supersession as the Old Historicist way of reading time, explosion as the New Historicist model, and conjunction as Harris’ way of theorising time, one that is much more complex than either of the other two approaches.

Harris suggests that conjunction, as a theoretical approach to texts, allows us to read matter ‘not just synchronically in relation to its moment of production or use, but also for the traces of other times – past and future – legible within it; and by doing so, recognize how matter, like a palimpsest, exhibits a temporality that is not one’ (p. 24). Throughout the book, Harris uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to structure his theory of multi- or poly-chronic matter – that is, material objects that bear the traces of many times in ways that disturb present-day assumptions and suggest innovative ways of re-imagining both the past and the future.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which contain two chapters. The first section focuses on failed supersession in George Herbert’s The Temple and William Shakespeare’s Second Henriad – that is, the difficulty of imaging a future without dragging along the past, which inevitably haunts any attempts to transcend it. Section two, focussing on the logic of explosion, examines John Stow’s recording of a line of Hebrew, written on a stone unearthed from Ludgate, in his Survey of London, and the smelly implications of Macbeth’s first scene direction: ‘Thunder and lightning’ (p. 120, italics in Harris). Both texts, Harris argues, construct ‘polychronic objects’ from the Jewish or Catholic past to ‘flash up’ and challenge the assumptions of the Protestant present (p. 94).
The book’s third section turns to the logic of conjunction, which synthesizes supersessionary and explosive temporalities, but, Harris argues, does so in a metonymic, not metaphoric, fashion. As a metonymic synthesis, conjunction does not depend on any perceived resemblance between supersession and explosion, and thus exists side by side with the other two, neither cancelling nor transcending them.

Harris uses this model in Chapter 5 as he places the writings of Hélène Cixous and Margaret Cavendish in dialogue to suggest a queer temporality that disrupts binaries of self and other, masculine and feminine, and western and oriental. In Chapter 6, Harris examines the notoriously unstable temporality of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, arguing that we should understand the handkerchief as a palimpsest that pulls multiple times together in conjunction – not just within the play, but also for today’s readers and audiences. In a coda, Harris turns to a modern text, Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 ethnographic narrative *In an Antique Land*, to suggest how untimely matter from the past can ‘help confound the fantasy that insists on treating the orient and the past as synonyms partitioned from the west’ (p. 194).

*Untimely Matter* is rigorously researched, well argued and skilfully written, and follows its own argument by using the past to suggest alternative ways of imaging both present and future. It is, of course, not flawless. At times, most notably in the *Macbeth* chapter, Harris’ readings become a little too New Historicist – that is, they pay so much detailed attention to historical contexts that the texts themselves get short shrift. However, Harris’ book impresses with the depth and breadth of his knowledge, and the skill with which he brings together multiple branches of theoretical discourse to inform and advance his argument. In short, *Untimely Matter* must count as one of the more significant works of literary scholarship of recent years.

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