EARLY MODERN CULTURAL STUDIES

SHAKESPEARE AND THE QUESTION OF CULTURE

EARLY MODERN LITERATURE *and the* CULTURAL TURN

DOUGLAS BRUSTER

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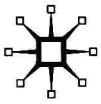

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Some of the chapters in this book have been published elsewhere in various forms. Throughout, I have attempted to incorporate the most recent criticism into my revisions of these pieces, as well as to

make the relation between their arguments and the larger subject of this book clearer. An earlier version of chapter 3, "The Structural Transformation of Print in Late Elizabethan England," was published in *Print, Manuscript, Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England,* ed. Arthur F. Marotti and Michael D. Bristol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000); chapter 4, "The Dramatic Life of Objects in the Early Modern Theater," has been published in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama,* ed. Natasha Korda and Jonathan Gil Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); an earlier version of chapter 5, "Female-female Eroticism and the Early Modern Stage," was published in *Renaissance Drama* 24 (1993 for 1995); chapter 6, "Shakespeare and the End of History: Period as Brand Name," was published, in an earlier form, in *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium,* ed. Hugh Grady (New York: Routledge, 2000); an earlier version of chapter 7, "Shakespeare and the Composite Text: The New Formalism," appeared, under a slightly different title, in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements,* ed. Mark David Rasmussen (London: Palgrave, 2002); and chapter 8, "The New Materialism in Early Modern Studies," appeared first in *Material Culture and Cultural Materialisms in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,* ed. Curtis Perry (Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, vol. 5; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2001). I am grateful to these publishers for their generous permission to reprint.

On a more personal level, I am also thankful to the editors of the above collections. Not only have they supported my work, in each instance they provided comments and questions that made the essay in question much stronger. Because editing is typically a thankless business, I want to express special gratitude to them for their collegial help.

A Note on Texts

Approximate dates for plays cited in this book are most often taken from *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700,* 3rd edition, ed. Alfred Harbage, revised by S. Schoenbaum and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim (London: Routledge, 1989). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Jonson in this study are from *Ben Jonson,* ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52); those from Nashe are from *The Works of Thomas Nashe,* ed. R. B. McKerrow, 5 vols. (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1904–08); and those from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare,* 2nd edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). I have modernized some of the spelling and punctuation in the passages quoted here.

Series Editor's Foreword

Douglas Bruster's *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* is a welcome addition to the Early Modern Cultural Studies series, and to cultural criticism in general, because it reinvestigates, from both a theoretical and from a practical perspective, the nexus between the categories of "the literary" and "culture." In *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture,* Bruster proposes an alternative to the Clifford Geertz–inspired "thick" description that characterizes much of New Historicist and other forms of cultural criticism. Bruster argues that, while "entertaining" because of its narrative qualities, "thick" description typically offers too narrow a slice of culture to give us a reliable sense of a culture's "representative beliefs, practices, and symbols." If "thick" description once was a much-needed corrective to the grand narratives of critics like E. W. M. Tillyard and social historians like Christopher Hill and Lawrence Stone, Bruster's case suggests that recent historical criticism has veered too far in the direction of the local and peculiar to be telling us a great deal about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English culture as a whole. What Bruster offers instead is what he calls a "thin" description, a kind of criticism that, like a cinematic "deep focus," allows us to keep various places of culture in view simultaneously. Yet Bruster's approach is hardly a return to the narrative tradition that finds linear unity in entire epochs. Rather, he offers his work as a supplement to New Historicism's thick description by incorporating a broader range of contextual elements than New Historicism commonly employs. Beyond the powerful, yet narrowly meaningful, anecdote, Bruster frames his discussion of early modern culture with a consideration of genre, literary conventions and fashions, source texts, repertorial aims, habits, the use of props in the playhouse, and printing-house organization. Separate chapters on print culture in late-Elizabethan England, the dramatic objects of the theater, and female-on-female eroticism offer searching applications of the thin description method. One of several

the startling conclusions advanced by Bruster is that, contrary to a prevailing view (among New Historicists), print culture is more concerned with the representations of "persons as objects of discourse" than it is with expressions of the self.

The three remaining chapters are dedicated to an analysis of how prominent critical schools, habits of thought, and critical key words shape our literary readings. Bruster's aim here is to bring the same kind of rigor and scrutiny to the reading of criticism that we commonly bring to the reading of literature. First Bruster turns his attention to the history and politics of two prominent literary terms that are often used interchangeably—"Renaissance" and "early modern"—and argues that the concept of an "English Renaissance" is largely an invention of American academia. In the final two chapters, he turns to the promise of current trends in cultural materialism and the new formalism. The cultural materialism under the microscope here is not of the dogmatically Marxist variety, the kind that deals with "monumental, almost glacial transitions in history" and large, abstract concepts such as "social class, base and superstructure, and ideology." Bruster is interested in a more nimble materialism that centers on the actual material objects of daily life and the theater and the place they have in culture. Likewise, Bruster finds much value in the new formalism that no longer disregards history, and which once again has brought issues of genre, convention, and style to the forefront—*and* investigates their relationship to the world outside the text. While Bruster finds a great deal of promise in the efforts of the new formalism, he also discusses their shortcomings, and concludes his study with a simple, yet rarely asked, and all-important question: Is it even possible to explain the relationship between text and context, between text and culture, between text and the world outside the text? His answer will surprise many readers.

Ivo Kamps
Series editor

PREFACE

Because "culture" is such a confusing word, I should say at the outset what this book is not about. Concerned with Shakespeare and culture, and, necessarily, with some of the productive confusions that accompany this term, it does not try to tell a story about Shakespeare's life in relationship to his culture—a story, for example, whereby Shakespeare can easily become a Catholic, bee-keeping lawyer who served in the Low Countries, composing plays and poems in his spare time. Gentle or ungentle, Shakespeare is less interesting to me than what he wrote. Nor, on the other hand, is the "question of culture" meant to imply that this book argues for the centrality of Shakespeare's works to the education of those who aspire to culture, interpreted grandly. I will leave such arguments, pro and con, to those who feel more comfortable making them. Instead, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* examines how we read Shakespeare's works in relation to his own culture. It is one of my beliefs, though, that no study interested in this topic can examine Shakespeare's works in isolation: Shakespeare was one of many talented individuals writing for the acting companies of his day; contemporary writers of dramatic and nondramatic literature alike had perspectives that cannot be ignored if we wish to have a rich understanding of what was culturally possible, and culturally likely, in Shakespeare's England.

This examination spells "culture" with a small, rather than capital "c." Yet I remain interested in the variety of ways that we use this seemingly all-purpose word. In fact, this study begins from the conviction that while such variety of definition has fostered a diverse body of criticism, it is now time—perhaps past time—to take stock not only of where we have come with the cultural analysis of Shakespeare's works and early modern literature generally but of how we perform such cultural analysis in the first place.

My argument here involves three separate but related observations. First, I hold that, when defined as an extensive thing (consisting, for example, of widespread beliefs, practices, and symbols),

culture is largely incommensurate with the limited number of literary texts from which we commonly adduce it. This is a fancy way of saying that culture is bigger than the books we tend to read. Although most critics would assent to this blunt truism, in practice its truth is less frequently followed. We often make large claims from small evidence and claims about culture from a relatively few cultural texts.

My second major observation dovetails with the first, and concerns the kind of criticism typically used to read cultural "texts": thick description. A borrowing from anthropology, thick description has become the most popular method of analyzing literary texts for their cultural content. I argue here that thick description is a fairly inefficient way of retrieving the cultural from literary texts; it remains an entertaining but problematic method of getting to culturally representative beliefs, practices, and symbols. If, as many feel, culture is indeed a text, we need to read more pages of culture's text than thick description commonly has us do.

Related to both of the preceding points, my third observation actually calls into question the larger relevance of cultural inquiry as practiced in this field: It is arguable that the culture we recover from literary texts is largely literary in nature. With the word "literary" here I mean to invoke not an idealized realm of transcendent masterpieces but the material resources that enable and affect the production and consumption of imaginative texts—texts that we often take as direct imaginings of their surroundings. This is not, of course, to maintain that there is nothing outside the text. Instead I assume that what *is* outside the text undergoes extensive mediation on its way in, and similarly from there to readers. Genres, conventions, icons, source texts, literary fashions, repertorial goals, habits, and personnel, printing-house organization: Each of these had an important, even "cultural" role in shaping literary texts of the early modern era.

The foregoing positions suggest that we need to modify the practice of thick description typically used in the cultural analysis of literature. Following an introduction that traces the rise of various kinds of cultural investments in Shakespeare and his contemporaries—from the belletristic to the new historicist and postcolonial—I present a brief for a "thin" mode of description. Such thin description looks to supplement, rather than replace, thick description's heightened amplification of detail; it aims to do so with a more deliberate approach to cultural elements. The aggregation of evidence; the determination, where possible, of that which is culturally representative; and the necessity of acknowledging context (including the scholarly con-

versation that contextualizes one's research)—all these go into a thinner kind of description than is usually practiced. Now, such thin description admittedly lacks the compelling narrative style of thick description. Yet the kind of focus that thin description helps to provide can benefit our criticism by allowing us, like audiences witnessing an instance of "deep focus" cinematography, to keep multiple planes of a culture in view without the abrupt editorial cuts between part and whole, anecdote and culture, that remain so characteristic of thick description.

As its section heading implies, the next part of this book uses thin description to analyze various aspects of early modern literary culture. Here I take up, respectively, a mode of writing, the career of stage properties in various early modern dramatic texts, and a sexual trope in early modern literature generally. Chapter 3 is the first of these, and addresses the remarkable confluence of highly "embodied" writing in late Elizabethan England. The pinnacle of what we often call the English Renaissance, the period from 1590 to 1610 witnessed the proliferation of works that put resonant identities and physical forms on the printed page with new intensity. We are used to thinking about this Renaissance through the expressive individual, through the lens, for example, of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and its focus on significant and complex presentations of the self. What chapter 3's examination of embodied writing demonstrates is that the power of print during the height of the English Renaissance was more about the other than the self—at the very least, about writers' freedom to put others' bodies and identities onto the printed page. Whether in the form of satire, erotica, *à clef* writings, or controversial pamphlets, this intensified emphasis on persons as objects of discourse became a central feature of Elizabethan print culture. In fact, a thin description of the English Renaissance could very well define that Renaissance around, and on the basis of, this newly intensified handling of the personal in print.

A more literal kind of handling occasions chapter 4, which performs a thin description of stage properties in early modern drama. Extending the interests of a newer kind of materialism (discussed in chapter 8), critics have increasingly attended to the physical properties held by characters in early modern plays. That attention, however, has not translated into a larger portrait of such stage properties and their role in the early modern theater. The thick description of such objects as letters, handkerchiefs, and severed hands often gives us rich insights into the function of these particular objects but leaves us wondering about the larger place of such objects in the

repertorial system. Analyzing the distribution of stage properties in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries on a diachronic rather than—as is often the case with thick description—synchronic scale, I note significant tendencies in their appearance, tendencies that can be ascribed to both genre and date. What this thin description demonstrates is that, in the frequency with which they employ properties in their plays, dramatists were heavily influenced by the literary kinds in which they composed their plays and by trends that varied with time. For instance, from the late 1580s through the late 1630s the number of props called for by play texts declined at a fairly regular rate, although, as we will see, Shakespeare's own use of properties eventually resisted this pattern.

Where the two chapters preceding it propose various "genres" that have not been treated as such before—the genre of embodied writing and stage properties considered as a genre in their own right—chapter 5 takes up a particular trope in early modern dramatic texts: that of two female bodies imagined in erotic conjunction. With the recent publication of Valerie Traub's *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England,* and with the heightened attention that criticism has paid to issues of collaboration and friendship in early modern texts, many commentators have shown an interest in the utopian possibilities of a homonormative thematic in early modern literature—a thematic, in short, of same-sex partners expressing mutual affection in an equitable (and somewhat idealized) relationship. In this chapter I describe the way in which early modern texts, many of them dramatic works, often imagined pairs of female bodies in erotic situations neither affectionate nor mutually pleasuring but bound up, instead, with elements of coercion and hierarchy. These moments of female-female eroticism were rarely "for" the figures involved; more often they appear to have been presented for the voyeuristic pleasure of audiences and readers. Analyzing works by Shakespeare, Middleton, and others, I argue that to scrutinize the full array of representations of erotically paired women in this period is necessarily to abandon belief in any consistently idyllic or utopian function to them. Just as the aggressive handling of the personal in the embodied writing explored in chapter 3 worked to objectify the identities involved, these cultural representations increasingly objectified, manipulated, and even disempowered the female figures they addressed. Like the two chapters preceding it in this section devoted to "literary culture," chapter 5 emphasizes the intensively *literary* nature of the phenomenon it addresses.

The second section of this book turns from literature to literary criticism, taking a now-familiar liberty with the word "culture" in examining critical culture relating to early modern literature. My primary assumption in this section is that criticism stands to benefit from being itself the object of critical readings. I believe, in short, that the manner in which we read and interpret early modern texts can profit from undergoing the kind of scrutiny we typically give to literary works. Critical genres, styles, and key words influence our habits of interpretation and shape our portraits of literature and culture. As influences, these elements of critical culture bear examination, for what they reveal about critical practice can help to contextualize our research into the early modern period and lend nuance to our findings.

In chapter 6, accordingly, I examine two terms central to the field(s) addressed in this book (and already deployed in this preface): "Renaissance" and "early modern." Although it is clear that each of these ways of defining the period under study implies something quite different from what is implied by the other definition, many critics (including myself) who write on Shakespeare and literature of his time find themselves using these terms alternately, employing "Renaissance" in some venues and "early modern" in others. Where did these terms come from, and what are the implications of using one instead of the other? Was Shakespeare a "Renaissance" and not an "early modern" author, or vice versa? In this chapter I argue that the English Renaissance we know was largely an American invention of the first third of the twentieth century and was signally related to the creation of a literary canon and era subsequently known as the "American Renaissance." The phrase "early modern," in turn, came into widespread use in literary criticism only during and after the 1980s. Initially an offhand term derived from philology, where it describes an era in *linguistic* history, "early modern" has come to serve as a quasi-scientific term by which the disciplines of history and literary criticism can hail the past as a recognizably "modern" forebear of the present.

The pull of innovation in much recent criticism is indeed apparent from such terms as "early modern" and from such critical genres as "new historicism." The final two chapters of this book examine two such critical genres, neither of which is as well established as new historicism. Chapter 7 takes up what has been called the "new formalism" in early modern studies. As evidenced by various essays in the recently published anthology *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements* and elsewhere, the new formalism is a critical mode

concerned with various "formal" elements of literary texts, from meter to vocabulary to genre, and with the relationship between such elements and larger issues and forces outside texts themselves. A brief way of describing the new formalism would be to say that this critical practice is the old formalism plus the new historicism. Such an unsubtle description leaves out volumes, of course, but hints at the new formalism's tendency to cast its net more broadly than did selected instances of formalist inquiry published earlier in the twentieth century. While it is dangerous to subscribe to stereotypes of the new criticism—stereotypes that can imply self-hypnotized critics believing that nothing existed other than the words of certain canonical short poems—it is clear that many works of literary criticism that can be identified as new formalist in nature have a greater interest than older formalisms did in the relationship between formal elements in a text and the world outside that text. To offer an instance of what such a newer formalism can accomplish, I posit in this chapter a material relationship between Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599) and Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) and explore the significance of that relationship for both a critical methodology—what is often called source study—and our understanding of these two writers' "politics."

The final chapter of this book takes up the "new materialism" in early modern studies. In recent years increasing numbers of critics have shown an interest in the material world of early modern England. From studies of clothing and household items to the larger ambitions represented in the title of *Material London, ca. 1600,* a newer kind of materialist criticism has become prevalent in the field. Whereas to many readers the term "materialism" conjures up images of marxist criticism concerned with monumental, almost glacial transitions in history—certainly with such large concepts as social class, base and superstructure, and ideology—this newer kind of materialism takes "matter" quite literally, focusing on physical objects and their cultural roles. Chapter 8 examines this decidedly post-marxist genre of criticism, arguing that its most promising aspects involve a return to the materialism of early modern England itself. That is, in contrast to the sometimes-abstract categories of traditional marxist criticism, this newer materialism, at its best, uses the language of the past to describe the function of the material in and for the world of early modern England. With these strengths, however, come certain weaknesses, among which is the tendency for the new materialism—like thick description—to be guided by the attractiveness and quiddity of the objects it seeks to interpret. As I argue in this chapter,

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors theorized the material in ways that were often quite sophisticated; learning from their understanding of the material world can help us to avoid the seductions of transference that can be involved in the study of objects.

I conclude *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* by asking whether cultural analysis, strictly conceived, is even possible. Hazarding that cultural study may be, among other things, one of the newest entries in a series of critical brand names, I suggest we use more deliberation in advertising the ability of our intellectual products to explain the relationship between the worlds in texts and the world outside them. To the study I have also appended a discursive etymology of "culture" aimed at supplementing my remarks about this term, and its range of meanings, throughout this book.

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