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M. Roston, Tradition and Subversion in Renaissance Literature: Studies in Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Donne

Christopher P. Baker

Georgia Southern University, cbaker@georgiasouthern.edu

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Tradition and Subversion in Renaissance Literature: Studies in Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Donne* by Murray Roston

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Murray Roston. *Tradition and Subversion in Renaissance Literature: Studies in Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Donne.*

Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007. xiv + 258 pp. index. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-8207-0390-9.

The framing device for this collection of essays (most of them previously published) is Roston's intention to answer deconstructionist claims that contradictory themes in literary works necessarily lead to an *aporia* or impasse which negates the possibility of meaning. Following Bakhtin's lead, he instead champions a rich "heteroglossia" which generates "the vitality of the work" (x). This is a worthy critical endeavor, but Roston's essays seem more concerned with engaging the elements of the texts themselves than with erecting the theoretical scaffolding necessary to fully present a "crucial and timely [reassessment]" of deconstruction (xiii).

He begins by acknowledging Barbara Lewalski's allegorical reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, but argues for Shylock as a usurious Satan-figure, with Antonio, the forgiving Christ-figure, as the true protagonist. He notes that pitting the evils of usury against Antonio's compassion does not result in a deconstructionist "impasse" because the merchant's borrowing of money is "now presented

not only as permissible but also as a commendable act of Christian piety" (37). Roston does not speculate on whether such a positive view of lending (typical of later Protestantism) should modify the recent critical drift toward a Catholic Shakespeare. Less compelling is his discussion of Hamlet's stoicism. That philosophy's generally favorable view of suicide is blunted by Hamlet's obsessive fear of non-being and decay which contributes to his famed procrastination. Roston holds up Hamlet's doubts about the ghost as further evidence for the possible absence of an eternal life: "neither [the ghost's] appearance nor its account of Purgatory constitute for Hamlet any final proof of the existence of an afterlife" (79). Yet in two statements Hamlet seems to imply just this. Immediately after seeing the ghost himself, Hamlet is fearless precisely because he believes in an afterlife: "And for my soul, what can it do to that, / Being a thing immortal as itself?" (1.4.66–67). He also later wonders if the ghost might be a spirit by which the devil "abuses me to damn me" (2.2.632) — an afterlife of eternal damnation. Roston's assertion that the play displays Hamlet's struggle to reach a conclusion already known to the audience — "that there is indeed a Christian afterlife" (79) — tends to slight the prince's own theological understanding by focusing too exclusively on his interaction with the ghost.

Studying *The Faerie Queene*, Roston provocatively argues that pagan allusions dominate the scriptural references, but his essay is less convincing when it seeks to explain why this should be so. Touching on the fields of art history, the Puritan reception of Mosaic Law, and Protestant religious drama (among other topics), he concludes that Spenser "adopted neither the allegorizing of pagan mythology typified by Golding's work nor the hostility to it among mainstream Puritans" (131). The resulting epic is portrayed as "a perfect instance" of intertextuality (132) but for a reason that would seem axiomatic for veteran readers of Spenser: he was "arguing in broader terms for the potential speciousness of all seeming truths" (126). More successful is Roston's reading of *Volpone* within the context of Italianate comedy, which renders the play — up to Celia's attempted rape — as an amusing variation on the theme of the cuckolded *senex*. However, his suggestion that acquisitiveness itself is depicted as "a commendable and very natural desire" (150) seems undercut by *Volpone*'s and *Mosca*'s lubricious personalities. The scene of attempted rape shifts the play to a tragic and didactic ending, satisfying Jonson's intent to "punish vice." This structural bifurcation (another example of intertextuality) would seem to violate Jonson's fondness for neoclassical consistency, yet, Roston plausibly contends, he seems to have sought an explicitly moralistic ending to attract recognition from university authorities who favored orthodox religious dramas. Roston's final essay argues convincingly that Donne's relationship to the meditative tradition is, despite his ardent Anglicanism, rooted in the Catholicism of his birth, specifically the interior emphasis of Ignatian meditation as opposed to a Protestant stress on the external world. Unlike reformist devotional manuals which urged the "consoling assurance" of God's love (195), Catholic manuals "employ scenes of eternal damnation to alarm the meditator into repentance" (197). Donne balances contrasting discourses, avoiding *aporia*.

Roston offers well-written and wide-ranging arguments which convey a healthy suspicion for the hermeneutics of suspicion. However, the rich mine of close reading and intellectual history found here is deeper than the proffered critique of postmodern theory.

CHRISTOPHER BAKER

Armstrong Atlantic State University