Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History

CRITICISM AND COMPLIMENT
Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History

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CRITICISM AND COMPLIMENT

The politics of literature in the England of Charles I

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This is a book about literature by a historian. I hope that by making such an announcement I do not deter either side of its intended audience: literary scholars on account of a suspicion that a historian may wish to ‘reduce’ the plays and poems to ‘mere’ historical artefacts; historians because they tend not to accept literature as ‘real’ historical evidence. For it is my purpose both to argue for the importance of this material as primary evidence for the history of ideas and politics, and to re-read literary texts as documents of the culture and values of Caroline England.

Recently, the new historicist literary critics have valuably questioned the premise upon which for too long criticism has rested: the premise of an autonomous aesthetic, a realm of ‘art’ which may be differentiated from, and studied apart from, society, ideology and culture. The historicists have called for a new methodology, even a new discipline of ‘cultural criticism’ that would dispense with the conventional boundaries of literature and history, boundaries which are themselves constructs of our own culture and which may have obstructed our perception of others. Such recent work offers the exciting prospect of a reinterpretation of Renaissance society.

This book, however, did not originate in any such theoretical reflection. It began life, more modestly, as a chapter of a book on The Personal Rule of

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Since this book was completed, Lauro Martines has become the first historian to add his voice to the call for a new cultural criticism. See L. Martines, Society and History in English Renaissance Verse (Oxford, 1983); a manual for the historical reading of literary evidence. In the introduction to his Collected Essays (Brighton, 1985), Christopher Hill also argues powerfully for the value of literary evidence, but undermines the claim by reading that literature from a priori assumptions.
Preface and acknowledgements

Charles I on which I have been engaged for some years. I went to the masques, plays and poems of the Caroline court initially as another source for an elucidation of the values of Charles I and his court. But what I discovered on further reading was not material that nicely illustrated accepted views (I fear the usual use made of literature by historians), but evidence that challenged those views. Evidence, that is, of debates and tensions, anxieties, doubts and criticisms articulated within the culture of the court, indeed opinions akin to those often identified only with the ideology of the ‘country’. Clearly this was material that questioned established historical and critical interpretations and merited close examination.

Recent works, several published since this book was drafted, have begun to identify currents of dissent in the drama and poetry of Renaissance England, drama and poetry which for too long has been read as literary homilies to the religion of order and obedience preached from the Tudor parish pulpits and promulgated by royal proclamations. But Caroline courtly modes are still characterized a priori as a culture of absolutism, the expression and justification by hired hands of the absolutist aims of an authoritarian monarch. It is the argument of the pages that follow that such a characterization rests upon often anachronistic assumptions – about the nature of the court, about puritanism, about a supposed polarity between court and country – and upon preconceptions – about genre, patronage, the position of the poet or playwright and about the possibilities for dissent.

My study neither rests on nor offers any new methodology. It does attempt to question the assumptions – both historical and critical – from which the literature has hitherto been read. Whilst it is not my primary purpose to offer an aesthetic reappraisal of Caroline court literature, I would suggest that traditional critical description and evaluation have been in part politically determined. When we speak of ‘cavalier’ drama or poetry, we may have predetermined our reading and confined to a (defeated) party a literature that articulated the concerns of an age. For it is my contention that, far from being simply monotonous or partisan, the literature of the Caroline court reveals debate, ambiguity and anxiety, and so offers a rich case study of political discourse, of social and political ideas in early Stuart England.

In the traditional accounts of Caroline court culture, the masque has been taken as the ultimate courtly mode, that literary form which had its raison d’étre in celebration and whose authors were the most sycophantic of the hired admirers of the king. I therefore decided to take as the core of my study of court literature the drama, poetry and masques of the three authors who succeeded Ben Jonson as devisers of court entertainments in the reign of Charles I: William Davenant, Thomas Carew and Aurelian Townshend. It might be said that such men exemplify the court, its concerns and values. However, after a discussion of the contentions that have consciously or
Preface and acknowledgements

unconsciously obstructed our historical and critical understanding, and a re-
examination of their literature, I wish to argue that these men belong in a
broader context of humanism and should not be confined to the narrow
constraints of a party or decade. And I hope too to have shown that, working
within the conventions and modes of court drama, masque and love poetry,
they engaged in a searching examination of the ethical and political issues of
their age, and proffered counsel to the ruler both through criticism and
through compliment. If I have established a case, then the culture and politics
of Caroline England await a full reconsideration.

Research in the humanities requires primarily three things: financial
support to travel to archives and libraries, time for research reflection and
writing, and stimulation and support from colleagues – by means both of
criticism and of compliment. I have many to thank under each head. I am
most grateful to the Wolfson Foundation, the British Academy, the
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lecturer. Both the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and the Hunting-
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and politics which has proved an unparalleled stimulation.

As a historian embarking on a study of literature I owe more debts to many
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working in the field of literary studies I have been extremely grateful to long-
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The dedication expresses not only my greatest scholarly debts, but friendships which have inspired my historical studies.

Stanford Humanities Center 1986

Kevin Sharpe
# ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodleian Quart. Rec.</td>
<td>Bodleian Quarterly Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.H.R.</td>
<td>English Historical Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.L.H.</td>
<td>English Literary History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng. Lit. Renais.</td>
<td>English Literary Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hist. Journ.</td>
<td>Historical Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.M.C.</td>
<td>Historical Manuscripts Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt. Lib. Quart.</td>
<td>Huntington Library Quarterly</td>
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