Engaging with current debates over the nature of subjectivity in early modern England, this fascinating and original study examines sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conceptions of memory and forgetting, and their importance to the drama and culture of early modern England. Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr. discusses memory and forgetting as categories in terms of which a variety of behaviors – from seeking salvation to pursuing vengeance to succumbing to desire – are conceptualized. Drawing upon a range of literary and non-literary discourses, represented by treatises on the passions, sermons, anti-theatrical tracts, epic poems and more, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Webster stage “self-recollection” and, more commonly, “self-forgetting,” the latter of which provides a powerful model for dramatic subjectivity. Focusing on works such as Macbeth, Hamlet, Dr. Faustus and The Duchess of Malfi, Sullivan reveals memory and forgetting to be dynamic cultural forces central to early modern understandings of embodiment, selfhood and social practice.

**Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr.** is Associate Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities/Folger Shakespeare Library long-term fellowship, he is the author of *The Drama of Landscape: Land, Property, and Social Relations on the Early Modern Stage*, is on the editorial board for *Renaissance Drama*, and is Associate Editor of *Shakespeare Studies*. He has published articles on Shakespeare, Marlowe, Marston, Spenser and others in a number of journals including *ELH, Shakespeare Quarterly* and *Renaissance Drama*, and has contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600* (1999) and *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe* (2004).
Since the 1970s there has been a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political, and cultural history. While the earliest New Historicism was criticized for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, and psycho-analytical work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and of the concept of identity itself, on theatre as a political and economic phenomenon and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theatre which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

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