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978-1-107-03057-2 - Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama

Jeremy Lopez

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CONSTRUCTING THE CANON OF EARLY MODERN DRAMA

For 100 years, the drama of Shakespeare's contemporaries has been consistently represented in anthologies, edited texts, and the critical tradition by a familiar group of about two dozen plays running from Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* to Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* by way of Dekker, Jonson, Middleton, and Webster. How was this canon created, and what ideological and institutional functions does it serve? What preceded it, and is it possible for it to become something else? Jeremy Lopez takes up these questions by tracing a history of anthologies of "non-Shakespearean" drama from Robert Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744) through those recently published by Blackwell, Norton, and Routledge. Containing dozens of short, provocative readings of unfamiliar plays, this book will benefit those who seek a broader sense of the period's dazzling array of forms.

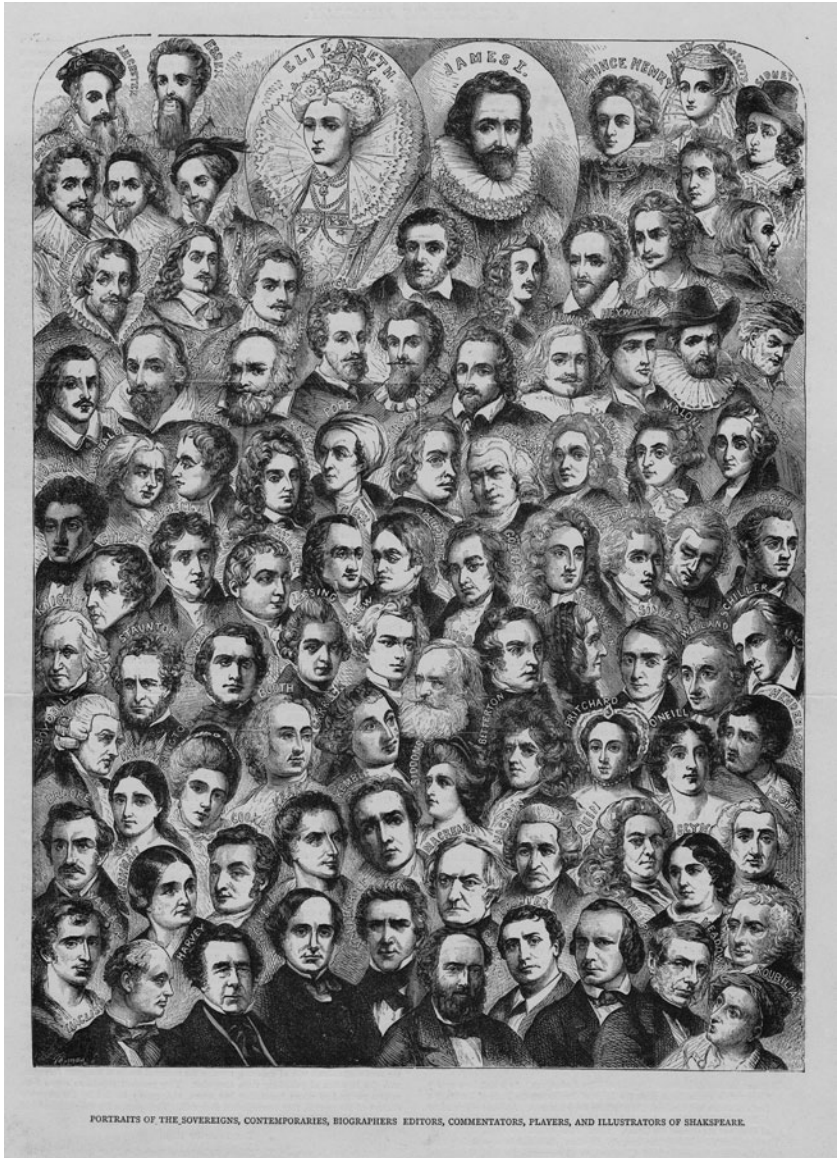
JEREMY LOPEZ is Associate Professor of English at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (2003), the editor of *New Critical Essays: Richard II* (2012), and has written numerous articles on the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. From 2003 to 2013 he served as theater review editor for *Shakespeare Bulletin*, and he is currently, with Paul Menzer (Mary Baldwin College), editor of the on-line early modern studies journal *The Hare*.

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Portraits of the Sovereigns, Contemporaries, Biographers, Editors, Commentators, Players, and Illustrators of Shakespeare. Wood engraving by William Luson Thomas (1830–1900), published in 1864 as an illustration in *Shakespeare Memorial, 1564–1864*, a commemorative volume published for the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. Image provided courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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Preface

This book is written in sixty-one short chapters. A rationale for this form is provided in Chapter 6 and Chapter 60, but it is not necessary to read those chapters first. Like any given play in an anthology of early modern drama, any given chapter in this book exists in three independent but interrelated dimensions. In the horizontal, or historical, dimension, the work is situated in relation to what has come before it and what will come after it. In the vertical, or generic, dimension, the work is situated in relation to others of similar or different kind. The dimension of depth, or what I will call the aesthetic, unfolds from within the work itself. Like the plays in an anthology, then, the chapters in this book can be read in any order, for the content of each determines its position. It is true, nevertheless, that the fullest understanding of a given chapter's content *and* position can be achieved only in relation to a view of all the chapters.

The first part of the book traces a history of "non-Shakespearean" drama as it has been represented in anthologies, collections, and single-text editions since the eighteenth century. The reader interested in reading the book's chapters out of order will find in Chapter 4 a bibliographical list of all the anthologies I refer to in the book. Outside of Chapter 4, most of these anthologies are referred to by editor's name and accompanied, where necessary, by date of publication. Six anthologies are referred to with particular frequency: the four editions of Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays*, edited by Robert Dodsley himself in 1744, Isaac Reed in 1780, John Payne Collier in 1825, and William Carew Hazlitt in 1874; and the recent anthologies published by Blackwell (1999 and 2005, ed. Arthur Kinney) and Norton (2002, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen). The reader will find these referred to as "the 1825 *Select Collection*," or "Reed's Dodsley," or "the Dodsleys," or "Norton" or "the Blackwell anthology" (etc.) as context requires.

The second part of the book develops a theory of dramatic form which is meant to make obscure, noncanonical plays more legible than they have

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been. My starting assumption in interpreting a given noncanonical work is that my reader has probably *not* read it, and, indeed, that the fact of its not being read is the most important constitutive element of its current historical and aesthetic identity. My analytical method is to find within the play's obscurity the secret of its form; the resulting interpretation is meant to be an incitement to reading rather than a definitive reading in itself. To keep the chapters short and sharp, I have been sparing with footnotes, and I frequently treat the critical history of a given play allusively or elliptically; the bibliography contains references to some (but not all) relevant critical works not cited in the text, with a particular emphasis on works concerned with canon formation and canon revision.

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I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to inflict the arguments of this book, in their less and more finished states, upon numerous receptive, thoughtful, often captive audiences. I am grateful to Coppélia Kahn and Bill Carroll for inviting me to speak at the Harvard University Shakespeare Seminar; Katie Goodland for inviting me to speak at the Columbia University Shakespeare Seminar; Andrew Hartley and Kirk Melnikoff for inviting me to speak at the Shakespeare in Action Center at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte; and Lynne Magnusson for inviting me to speak at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto. Students at Toronto and in the

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