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Matt Williamson. *Hunger, Appetite and the Politics of the Renaissance Stage.*
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by Jan Purnis

Matt Williamson's *Hunger, Appetite and the Politics of the Renaissance Stage* offers an insightful analysis of the twin drives of hunger and appetite from a wide range of thematic perspectives, with chapters on "Thinking through Hunger and Appetite in Renaissance England," "Service," "The Food Gift," "Sexual Desire," "Female Food Refusal," "Imperial Appetites," and "Revolt." Williamson draws on the work of Stephen Mennell to distinguish between hunger and appetite, noting that hunger is a physiological state implying necessity, whereas appetite is more psychological and can extend to the desire for more abstract things (3). Williamson uses a Marxist lens to read dramatic representations of these drives in the context of lived experiences within changing socioeconomic conditions, and he partly positions the monograph as countering the limitations of Cultural Materialist and New Historicist approaches and their "tendency to treat all forms of text as indistinguishable" (12). As part of this goal, Williamson emphasizes early modern playhouses as "specific superstructural entities, engaged in the production of both profit and ideology" (12). Not only was food staged in dramatic performance, but it was also sold along with the plays, and the heterogeneous nature of the audience members and the relative state of their bellies made for different and complex responses to the performance of hunger and appetite on stage. He argues that "the representation of hunger and appetite in the Renaissance theatre is both qualitatively different from that to be found in other texts of the period, and simultaneously a specific embodiment of the wider forces at work in contemporary society which, as a consequence of the peculiar characteristics of the

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theatre business, emerge in this context with particular clarity” (42). Not unsurprisingly, given the book’s focus on drama, Edmund Spenser does not appear in the index, although his *A View of the Present State of Ireland* is listed in the bibliography.

An impressive diversity of English plays, some less familiar and some staples (so to speak) are analyzed, but Williamson is careful to contextualize primary material, which is helpful for non-specialists and for highlighting the relevance of specific details from the plays (whether familiar or unfamiliar) to the argument. Plays discussed include Lyly’s *Campaspe*, Massinger’s *The Bashful Lover*, Fletcher’s *Women Pleas’d*, Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Massinger’s *The Picture* (in the chapter on service); Wilkins and Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, Shakespeare and Middleton’s *Timon of Athens*, and Massinger’s *The Unnatural Combat* (in the chapter on the food gift); Middleton and Dekker’s *The Bloody Banquet* and Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (in the chapter on sexual desire); Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Chapman’s *The Widow’s Tears* (in the chapter on female food refusal); Fletcher’s *Bonduca* and Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Sea Voyage* (in the chapter on imperial appetites); and the anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, Shakespeare and Marlowe’s *2 Henry VI*, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (in the chapter on revolt). This wide range of texts allows for nuanced analysis of the function of hunger and appetite within each chapter’s thematic focus, but because the book does not offer extensive close readings of any of the plays (*The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, gets only three paragraphs), I did find myself at times wishing for further development of the analyses of some of the plays beyond the narrow focus and the brief scenes being discussed. This is not to say, however, that there are not interesting and insightful analyses of these scenes or that the larger concerns of the plays are not addressed.

Chapter 1 considers the lived experiences of hunger and appetite in relation to the changing modes of production and class struggle of early modern England. Williamson suggests that a Marxist approach allows for an understanding of hunger as an impetus, rather than side effect, of these social changes (5). The chapter also considers medical and religious discourses of hunger and appetite in the period and discusses the implications of staging the twin drives. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the hungry servant stereotype in the context of historically specific conditions of service, dramatic form, audience response, and relationships between husbands, wives, and their servants. Williamson argues that “attention to hunger and appetite

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provides an invaluable perspective on the competing material and ideological emphases which have defined critical attention to service” (44), and that the period’s staged representations of service expose “a pervasive concern that the ruling class might be reduced to the same basic material compulsions as those of the male domestic servant” (45). Chapter 3 engages with theories of gift exchange to examine food gifts in relation to “notions of a crisis in charity and hospitality” (75); here, Williamson makes the claim that focusing on “the presence or absence of use value within gift exchange” demonstrates the “interrelation of plenty and want” in food distribution, making it “possible to move beyond an analysis which privileges the perceived benefits to the donor, in favor of an approach which acknowledges the significance of the recipient” (75). The chapter includes discussion of the figure of the discharged soldier as commentary on “policies of pacifism carried out by monarchs such as James I” (6).

The focus of Chapter 4 is on “the elision of appetite and desire” in early modern theatre (7). Williamson observes that although this is a commonplace elision, the early modern theatre is distinct in several ways, and he aligns these distinctions with the emphasis in medical theory on the literal connections between sexual and culinary consumption, theological debate about the legitimacy of moderate sexual intercourse, and the political implications of the theatrical representation of excessive desire. A central point is that “food, as the most basic instance of commodification within early modern society, serves as a metaphor for the commodification of sexuality” (123).

In Chapter 5, Williamson reads theatrical examples of female food refusal within the “miraculous maid” (7) pamphlet tradition that related stories of women engaging in food refusal for religious reasons and within changes to household production and “the depreciating material power of women within both the home and wider society” (147). The chapter also includes a section on the lusty widow stereotype in an analysis of *The Widow’s Tears*. Building on suggestions by both Nancy A. Gutierrez and Sasha Garwood of the radical potential of female food refusal, but taking a different approach, Williamson argues:

that the potential radicalism of food refusal emerges not despite its fidelity to contemporary gender ideology, but rather because it carries that fidelity to a point of problematic excess. At its most subversive, food refusal develops as a form of almost parodic obedience which threatens to demonstrate the contradictory nature of the norms governing the lives of early modern women.

(124-5)

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Williamson further suggests that refusing food works to close off female bodies (in contrast to the porosity ascribed to them and noted by Gail Kern Paster), meaning that food refusal can “embody a state of absolute detachment from the world, in a manner which mimics the emerging, predominantly masculine model of the contained, self-sufficient body” (126) and can be read as “a rejection of the corrupting force of exchange” and thus “as the embodiment of a more general desire for absolute closure” (127).

Chapter 6 explores the ways in which theatrical representations of hunger and appetite served to legitimate or critique colonial expansion. Williamson argues that focusing on “the interrelation of hunger, appetite and empire” allows for acknowledgement of “the role played by imperial expansion in the elimination of hunger in England, while simultaneously figuring that expansion as a product, rather than a cause, of the country’s wider social changes” (8). The chapter also explores how hunger and appetite “emerge in the imperial context as a way of conceptualising a wide range of residual and emergent class subjects” (150), offering the starvation experienced by many colonists and references to cannibalism as evidence of how hunger, as depicted in plays like *The Sea Voyage*, is a force “which can corrupt identity, making the elite monstrous” (159). In Chapter 7, Williamson focuses on three plays (two featuring rural revolts and one, *Coriolanus*, featuring an urban example) to argue for the need to move “beyond the alternately dichotomous and hierarchical conceptions of revolt currently dominant in the study of Renaissance theatre” (176), suggesting instead that recognition of “the class dichotomy of rich and poor, and the fractured nature of the ruling classes at a time of sweeping social change, can provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of hunger, appetite and revolt” (177). Williamson analyzes examples in which “revolt is constructed not as the antithesis of the appetites of the rich, but rather as their extension, a form of reckless consumption which dwarfs the gluttony of the elite” (185). He also claims that onstage revolts serve as “cautionary tales” for both upper and lower classes within the audience and that audience responses would have been influenced by “socio-geographic factors” (189), as when the city of London is depicted as threatened by revolt. As he shows, *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* (1593) juxtaposes the full bellies of audience members with the “gaping mouths of rural migrants” during a period of “unprecedented levels” of migration into the city from the countryside (189).

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The book is extensively researched and well-written, and the formulaic structure is useful in terms of clearly positioning each chapter within scholarship on the topic and highlighting the value added, outlining sections, and providing helpful summaries in the conclusions. The chapters fit together coherently and make sense in the order in which they have been arranged. There is, however, an error in the discussion of the “twin hungers of servant and wife” (65) in John Fletcher’s *Women Pleas’d*, where Williamson writes that, “like *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the famished Lorenzo finds common cause with his master’s daughter, the parallels between servant and wife serve as a means of critiquing a particular, implicitly Othered, form of mastery” (65-66). This is confusing and potentially misleading because it is Lancelot, not Lorenzo, who is Shylock’s hungry servant but Lorenzo who elopes with Shylock’s daughter. It is also worth noting a factually significant misprint that occurs in a footnote. In a quotation from A.L. Beier’s *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640*, readers are informed that the population of London was “about 12,000 in 1550, and rose to 200,000 in 1600” (189n25) but the 1550 number should read 120,000, as it appears in Beier.

In conclusion, *Hunger, Appetite and the Politics of the Renaissance Stage* makes an important contribution to early modern scholarship in its attention to under-examined questions of food lack as well as excess, and in its overarching argument about the value of employing a Marxist lens to consideration of hunger and appetite “as a means of conceptualising the rupture between lived experience and ideology which defined the period” (11). The chapters on service, the food gift, food refusal, and revolt are particularly innovative, but even chapters covering more familiar ground—links between food and sex, and between food and empire, for example—present compelling local insights. Furthermore, Williamson makes a case for the relevance of his monograph not only to early modern studies but also to current inequalities associated with globalization and other forces, and this relevance has only deepened since the book’s publication given the profound socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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