

Still, I must emphasize that for what it is—and it *is* a lot—this is a superb study of Foxe's famous and influential work.

Steve Mentz. *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. x + 261 pp. + 1 illus. \$89.95. Review by ROBERT C. EVANS, AUBURN UNIVERSITY MONTGOMERY.

In this clearly written, substantive, and well-researched book, Steve Mentz makes a strong case for the importance of prose fiction in the literary and social culture of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. He argues, for instance, that “[a]s we come to realize that our sense of Shakespeare’s disinterest in print publication may have been overstated, we should also remember that the common practice of playwrights who were not also shareholders seems to have been to write prose pamphlets along with plays, as did Greene, Lodge, Nashe, Chettle, Munday, and others” (6). Writing for print publication (in other words) may have been a far more important aspect of the literary environment of Shakespeare’s days than we commonly assume, and Mentz persuasively contends that the voluminous prose fiction produced during this time has been neglected for far too long. Fortunately, his own book is one of many signs lately that this neglect is diminishing, and indeed one great value of this volume is the over-view it provides of recent developments in the field. Mentz seems to have read everything relevant to his various topics, and his often lengthy footnotes (which are, thankfully, indeed at the foot of each page) are well worth reading in their own rights. He provides brief but judicious assessments of the scholarship he cites, often indicating the main points of critical controversy so that readers will have a clear sense of the many issues under debate. He will, usually, indicate his own position on contested matters, but he can also be trusted to summarize lucidly and fairly any points of contention. His highly detailed notes, almost by themselves, make this book worth owning.

But there is more, of course, to this book than its notes and the guides to scholarship they provide. There is, above all, Mentz’s own effort to describe the nature, origins, and significance of the rapidly increasing number of texts that helped shape the genre of prose fiction (and especially prose romance) in the late 1500s. Mentz contends that

the defining feature of Elizabethan fiction, the feature that distinguishes it from its medieval ancestors and connects it to the modern novel, is simply large-scale narrative coherence. This feature has been overlooked because our habits of reading have taught us to believe that length and coherence are marks of little distinction, but comparing Elizabethan fictions to their immediate predecessors supports my claim. Neither medieval romances of chivalry nor Renaissance *novelle* were organized this way. For Elizabethan romance writers plot became something to be shaped into a coherent and closed whole, and this innovation was key to the success and influence of their works. (11)

This is a tantalizing claim; if it ultimately proves convincing to other specialists in the field, it would seem to authorize a whole new emphasis on formalist study of a huge body of early modern literature. The coherence of literary works, of course, has been under suspicion and attack for many decades and from many quarters of literary theory, but Mentz's book seems to fly in the face of such deconstructive impulses. Thus he suggestively advises that "[r]eaders of early modern fiction should expect schematic and allegorical structures, be suspicious of apparent irrelevance and inconsistency, and discern behind discontinuity and multiple narratives formal patterns and intellectual consistency" (12). In other words, the old notion that a work of art is a carefully crafted formal object that strives for the achievement of complex unity may not be nearly as outmoded or irrelevant as some recent theorists have claimed. Approaching works with complex unity in mind may, in fact, be a historically appropriate way of thinking about fiction and other kinds of literature produced during the age of Shakespeare. One of the many virtues of Mentz's book, in fact, is that he shows how and why this alleged emphasis on unity and coherence resulted from specific historical conditions of the time. He argues, for instance, that the growing emphasis on publication through "[p]rint made lengthy coherent narratives practical for transmitting in significant numbers to a broad readership" (12). In other words, length and coherence as formal features were made possible, in part, through the rise of a new form of technology.

The most important influence on the rise of Elizabethan prose romance, however, was (or so Mentz persuasively argues) the impact of Heliodorus's *Aethiopian History*. "This late classical prose romance, rediscovered in six-

teenth-century Europe and widely published and translated, was” (Mentz claims) “a—perhaps *the*—key structural model for Elizabethan prose fiction,” and he stresses that “Heliodorus showed Elizabethan writers how to flesh out the bare dicta of Aristotelian theory with a complex, suspenseful narrative structure combining economy and amplitude. Borrowings from Heliodorus have been documented in Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser, among others,” but the larger impact of his text “on literary structures and techniques of plotting has been underestimated” (14). Mentz has no difficulty, in the following chapters, making good on this claim. By studying the fiction of Sidney, Lodge, Nashe, and especially Greene, he not only shows how Heliodorus affected their particular works but also helped contribute to the rise of a new kind of writing in England—a kind of writing which (he contends) contributed in turn to the eventual development of the English novel.

Mentz believes (and it is easy to share his conviction) that the time is over-ripe for a reassessment of Elizabethan prose fiction. As he says, the fiction of this period has long been under-valued when compared with the poetry and the drama. His own book makes a valuable contribution to rectifying this neglect, but it is a book written mainly for other specialists in Renaissance studies. What we need now is volume that can make a case to students and other general readers that this kind of fiction is well-structured, well-written, and pleasurable to read. The present book (like much present criticism) tends to focus primarily on the themes and ideas literature explores rather than on the skill, craft, art, and (dare it be said?) genius of much of the detailed phrasing of these works. Mentz is as qualified as anyone to produce the kind of book that still needs to be written—a book that might help win these writers and their prose the broader, deeper kind of attention, and affection, they deserve.

Mark Fortier. *The Culture of Equity in Early Modern England*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005. viii + 217 pp. Review by RICHARD C. TAYLOR, EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY.

It is a truism that the some of most extraordinary discoveries seem obvious after they have been revealed, and the prevalence of the idea of equity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English discourse falls into that category.