

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.

Once Mark Fortier carefully makes a case for the centrality of this term, and the ideas associated with it, in political and religious debate, in poetics, in law—in practically every domain of intellectual pursuit, the reader might respond: “yes, it’s obvious.” To Fortier’s credit, and as a result of the clarity and range of this study, the importance of a concept the author identifies as a cultural phenomenon has become undeniably apparent.

One reason the concept has resisted this sort of comprehensive critical study might be its very complexity: Fortier quotes John Selden as calling it a “roguish thing” an idea that is elusive, elastic, manipulable, a Janus-like cipher in the middle of the radical politics, theological disputes, and general turmoil of the period. Equity is a term still current in law: a remedy or process distinct from a strictly legal one. Part of its English origin lies in the creation of Chancery, a court designed to redress failings or inadequacies in the common law. The idea of equity suggests, in some contexts, that there is a form of justice or liberty or conscience that supersedes that offered by the judgment of law, in some ways equivalent to the notion of natural law. When the law is unfair, the idea of equity provides a remedy.

Fortier demonstrates that equity was a remarkably diverse concept. For example, one should read “equitably”; that is, in a measured spirit of fairness. Equity is divine, a gift of mercy meant to transcend the human constraint of the legal system. It is a virtue preached regularly from the pulpit. However, as the author amply demonstrates, it is a notion so malleable that it was used to support radical republican arguments, as well as those for royal prerogative. For Charles I, the divine nature of equity is the *sine qua non* of royal authority, that which permits him to minister to his people impartially and with a divinely inspired sense of justice. On the other hand, many argued that a monarch’s authority emanated from law, and so can never be above the law. The concept of equity, then, should serve as a check on royal tyranny.

Another strength of this study is its ability to extend its scope to the area of literary and rhetorical analysis. Too often in historical studies of this sort, authors choose either to exclude literary texts and literary or rhetorical analysis or, conversely (especially if they are English professors), to focus exclusively on the literary, with short shrift given to legal, political, or religious documents for example. Fortier skillfully reveals the “tropes of equitable reading” created in the seventeenth century to imagine “idealized readers—kind courteous, judicious, understanding, Christian and so forth.” The imagined “equitable

reader” brings a kind of divine justice to the experience of reading, thus rendering criticism, properly conceived, a holy act. The author then demonstrates how the principle of equity plays out in several of the canonical writers of the period: Sidney’s use of Euarchus in *Arcadia* as an exemplar of equity; Spenser’s understanding of justice and equity in *The Faerie Queene*; Shakespeare’s invoking the principle (although not the word itself) in *Merchant of Venice* with Shylock’s complaints about law and justice. The section on poetics adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of how writers of the time employed tropes of justice, law, fairness, and so on.

In a final section on “Radical Equity” Fortier shows, once again, how “roguish” the term could be, in this case in the context of the debates leading up to the Civil War. The rhetoric of equity was used commonly to justify the parliamentary rebellion. Apologists such as Milton argued that the idea of equity, embedded in the individual conscience, is rightfully the prerogative of Parliament, to whom a King should answer. In fact, the idea of equity was used to justify the regicide: there is a transcendent law or justice that supersedes tradition and royal authority and must be invoked to liberate people from tyranny. From the Royalist standpoint, of course, “True Equity” is vested in the monarch and that espoused by Parliament was treasonous casuistry.

He concludes with a discussion of Thomas Hobbes’s discussion of equity in *A Discourse of Laws*. Hobbes espouses the idea of “natural justice” and an equity upon which law must be built. Notions of equity, here conceived of as “natural” as well as providentially bestowed, demand our adherence to something like the “Golden Rule.” It helps to preserve the peace, to resolve disputes fairly. While republicans conceived of equity as the province of the individual—a guarantee of liberty, Hobbes saw equity as a part of “the King’s Reason” and therefore part of the rationale for obedience to royal authority.

Fortier’s book is an entertaining and accessible introduction to a principle that had remarkable versatility and potency for seventeenth-century writers, preachers, and political figures. Complex and elusive as the concept is, this study presents it in terms that students from a wide spectrum of disciplines can appreciate and use.