



Schmidt, Gary A. Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England

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Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England.

Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 246 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-1-4094-5118-1 (hardcover) \$114.95.

Focused on the conspicuously recurrent and amazingly resilient trope of Renaissance heterogeneity, Gary Schmidt's *Renaissance Hybrids* aims to address three distinct manifestations of hybridity in early modern literature and iconography—literal, generic, and cultural—in order to demonstrate how the first two types serve as vehicles for negotiating the latter, and to elucidate trans-historical connections between postmodern, postcolonial appropriations of the term and its topical resonances in early modernity. Schmidt's premise is that the increasing presence of hybrid creatures in English literature and iconography in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, together with the rise of generic hybridity registered in political satire, Jacobean tragicomedy, and Shakespeare's problem plays, records an increasing openness to the concept of hybridity and performs a variety of social functions: containing anxieties and wonder about other cultures, mediating between competing forms of political organization, managing social dissent, and reconceptualizing the history of England itself to accommodate differing visions of the island's past, present, and future. Moreover, Schmidt seizes on the hybrid's formidable tropological flexibility as an apt contextual frame for attending to various efforts at amalgamation that inflect the period's cultural history: the humanist effort to embrace and absorb the classical past, Puritan challenges to established order, and the Jacobean compromise between absolutist and parliamentary forms of governance.

Theorizing hybridity as a vehicle for cultural identification, Schmidt invokes Homi Bhabha's Third Space of negotiation in order to assert the notion that self identification—whether classist, nationalist, or generic—always involves a process of negation that cannot completely erase or absorb the term against which the self is defined, the stubborn chunks that for Claude Lévi-Strauss expose the impossibility of cultural homogeneity. Acknowledging that early modern culture formed two contradictory attitudes toward admixture—the hybrid as disordered mishmash or as idealized *via media*—Schmidt proceeds to consider the hybridizing impulses informing the intellectual boundary-crossing (both temporal and spatial) of Christian humanism; Spenser's treatment of mythic-historical, national, and cultural hybridity in *The Faerie Queene* and *A Viewe of the Present State of Ireland*; the satyr-satirist's influence on verse and drama during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; and the rise of Jacobean tragicomedy as a vessel for political and ideological inquiry in the plays of Marston, Fletcher, and Shakespeare. Schmidt initially traces the Latin etymology of the Renaissance English term *hybrid* to the Latin *hibrida*, or half-breed, and the first English use of the term by Jonson in *The New Inn* (1629) to describe Lady Frampul in her disguise as a lowly Nurse to the young boy Frank (her daughter in disguise): "An old Welsh herald's widow," "wild Irish born," and "a hybrid." Schmidt notes that the term is deployed here to describe not only cultural changelings but social and sexual ones as well. But, while Schmidt proceeds to tease out the implications of the first two registers in his subsequent treatment of hybridity, the latter receives comparatively scant attention. Ultimately obfuscating rather than interrogating the etymological and ontological correlations between *genre* and *gender*, Schmidt's study only tangentially acknowledges one particularly recurrent example of Renaissance hybridity—the hermaphrodite—perhaps because that figure's increasingly untenable tropological significance in terms of the putatively absolute integrity of sex and gender categories resists the apparently unidirectional teleology Schmidt advances by arguing for a progressive English openness to notions of cultural, sociopolitical, and literary comingling. The front cover of *Renaissance Hybrids* displays an intriguing illustration of two chimerical human-animal hybrids culled from Fortunius Licetus's *De Monstrorum* (1634), but readers expecting to encounter the early modern monstrous in its vast and spectacular variety will be disappointed since the interior of Schmidt's book includes only three other illustrations: another from Licetus and two from Andreas Alciato's

Book of Emblems (1546). This paucity of visual iconography is symptomatic of Schmidt's rather selective textual focus, which does little to expose the strategies behind a cannily selective trans-historical valorization of the trope but provides some detailed close readings that will particularly appeal to scholars possessing intimate knowledge of and keen interest in the political and nationalist sentiments informing Spenser's treatments of hybridity.

Renaissance Hybrids is carefully researched and well positioned theoretically, its claims clearly staked and its prose admirably crafted; only the brevity of its index limits its utility as a research tool. Schmidt generally assumes his reader is very well versed in the texts he treats, so the scarcity of synopses sometimes makes the details of his argument challenging to follow for those with only a general familiarity with the materials. Together with the lengthy sections devoted to Spenser, Schmidt's readings of verse and dramatic satire in the wake of the War of the Theatres and the Martin Marprelate scandal, and his treatment of the political utility of Jacobean tragicomedy, are particularly memorable. The book's very brief epilogue, which considers present-day prospects of interspecies hybridization and theoretical celebrations of marginality, border-crossing, and cross-cultural interaction, suggests that postmodern and postcolonial appropriations of the concept forge a valuable link to the past. This fascinating final perspective is unfortunately too fleeting to fully expose the trans-historical and trans-cultural aspects of heterogeneity alluded to in the introduction, but Schmidt's project certainly opens a wide window on how advantageously the complex dimensions of early modern cultural, political, and generic projects can be viewed through the stereoscopic lens of hybridity.

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