

¹ Terry Hodgson, *The Drama Dictionary* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1988); William Packard, David Pickering, and Charlotte Savidge, *The Facts on File Dictionary of the Theatre* (New York: Facts on File, 1988); Joel Trapido, ed., *An International Dictionary of Theatre Language* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1985).

The Elimination of Humanity

Deciphering Elizabethan Fiction

by Reid Barbour. University of Delaware Press, 1993

Revised by Warren Hope. Dr. Hope is author of The Shakespeare Controversy (1992).

Academic students of literature have for decades labored under the delusion that books are produced by books. The result is that their studies read clinically, like the writings of sexologists, haunted by technique. Not only is this result off-putting—trying to maintain interest in what they write is like trying not to stare at the little piles of dandruff on a professor’s shoulders—it is also fraudulent. Men and women produce books; pretending otherwise keeps us from even approaching the vicinity of truth.

Why should anyone pretend otherwise?

The answer to that one would require a history of the study of English literature in schools of higher education throughout the past century. This is not the place for that history. Briefly, three fashions threatened the once charming study of literature: first, the Teutonic analysis of ancient languages and literatures came into vogue; second, technology became king of the academic hill; and finally, such “disciplines” as management and marketing squirmed their way to the center of the post-secondary educational trough.

These three fads left literature in a lurch of sorts—trying to defend its once honorable terrain by taking on the superficial characteristics of these perceived threats to its legitimacy and status. Dons and professors, once content to murmur blissfully over their sherry, began to make ominous sounds—sounds reminiscent of philologists, nuclear physicists, and alchemists of greed. Even T.S. Eliot, Lord love us, was driven to comparing poets to catalysts. Catalysts, after all, are so much more objective, measurable, and knowable than, say, Francois Villon or Siegfried Sassoon—men who scratched and bled and did their best to speak the truth they found while passing through this world in verse. Writing about these individuals is all right for amateurs, mere poetry

lovers, but it is not scientific enough for the trendy poo-bahs who hold forth on campuses and deaden in the young the solitary pleasures derivable from reading. No, authors, like readers, are out—eliminated in much the same way that masses of humanity have been eliminated in this century through aggressive, routinized contempt—and technique is in.

Now, at the blighted end of this ghastly tradition, comes Reid Barbour, who earned a doctorate from the University of Rochester and groans for wages in the mines of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, turning his sights on Elizabethan prose and doing his damndest to squeeze every ounce of life out of it. Listen to the first sentence of his first chapter, on Robert Greene. “The work of this chapter is to reinvent Green’s narratives of ‘deciphering’ as they mark the first half of the author’s own schematized career.” This poor academic does not only think that books produce books, but also that chapters do work, that this work can be the reinvention of a dead man’s work, and that the unwieldy years that Robert Greene, with his long, red, pointed beard and his drinker’s nose, spent on this globe can be described as a “schematized career.” In the first sentence of the first chapter of his short but far too lengthy book, Barbour has flashed his credentials to his peers and turned Robert Greene into a printed circuit board, a bit of hardware, rather than an individual (you should excuse the expression) soul. Greene has been turned into an interchangeable part to which Barbour can do anything he pleases in an effort to forward his own schematized career. He need not care at all for Robert Greene, much less bring love, sympathy, or understanding to the study of him. All he needs to do is follow through on his first forbidding sentence and produce the umpteenth unreadable but publishable study of the techniques of Elizabethan prose. And that is exactly what he doggedly does.

The problem is not that Barbour has nothing to say. It is instead that he has very little to say and must stretch it to book length in a way that makes that little seem far more original and important than it is. Barbour should have produced a little article on three words—deciphering, discovery, and stuff—and their usefulness in reading the work of Elizabethan prose writers. He could have supported this case with examples from Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Dekker, the three writers he writes about in his book. The thing could have appeared in one of the multitude of “scholarly” journals and the world would have wagged merrily on its way. After all, for most people, reading Elizabethan prose is like listening to Gregorian chants—the kind of hobby best left off the resume.

Barbour’s profession prevents him from displaying the becoming modesty that would have been content with that little article. Instead, he writes as if he’s the first person under the sun to notice these three “key terms” and as if the

fact that he's noticed them upsets the interpretive appercarts of all readers of Elizabethan prose from Greene's time to the present. Worse, he argues that his noticing of these terms also overturns long held views on the origin of the novel in English. Barbour should become acquainted with a word traditionally linked with stuff—nonsense.

One of the dangers of writing an unreadable book is that the boredom induced in readers might send them searching for entertainment in odd nooks and crannies of the text. I found mine in the sixth footnote to Barbour's first chapter. That footnote reads: "Grosart defined *deciphering* as 'characterized, or explained, or unfolded' (II, 302). This is not a careful gloss, of course, although it does suggest the close relationship between deciphering and unfolding." Who is this Grosart Barbour is so quick to criticize and so shy about mentioning in the body of his book?

Alexander Balloch Grosart, the son of a builder and contractor, was born in Stirling on June 18, 1827. He was educated at the Falkirk parish school and he attended the University of Edinburgh. He left the university without taking a degree. In 1851, his edition of the poems of Robert Ferguson appeared. In that same year, he entered the theological hall of the United Presbyterian Church. He was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1856. From then on, he pursued two careers—as a minister and as what used to be called an antiquarian, a harmless eccentric obsessed with rummaging through old books and documents. He earned a reputation as a powerful and popular preacher, he wrote hymns and books on theology, and it is said that his antiquarian studies—the work of at least five lifetimes—never interfered with the "diligent and sympathetic" performance of his duties as a pastor.

There is no need to list here all of Grosart's scholarly accomplishments. What is pertinent has been described this way: "The Huth Library came to a close in 1886 after the issue of the works of Robert Greene in fifteen volumes, Thomas Nashe in six volumes, Gabriel Harvey in three volumes, and Thomas Dekker's tracts in five volumes." In short, Grosart gathered, edited, commented on, and published the prose works of all three of the writers Barbour considers. What is more, he did this in his spare time, financed only by what he made as a minister and by the payments of subscribers to his publications. How did he achieve all this? We are told he "spared neither time nor trouble in searching for rare volumes and recondite information, and in the course of his career travelled widely, ransacking the chief libraries of France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, as well as those of England, Scotland, and Ireland."

Barbour's entire book is a mere footnote to Grosart's work, a commentary on a commentary. It is symptomatic of the scholars of our ungrateful and self-important age that Barbour inverts this relationship by reducing Grosart to a

disparaging footnote and two entries in his bibliography—the scholarly equivalent of biting the hand that feeds him.

Unlike Grosart, Barbour is neither a scholar nor a critic. He is an ideologue. His book is a proselytizing tract for the ideology now dominant in the English departments of the Republic—an ideology Thomas Nashe called, centuries ago, “Idiotisme.” Here’s Nashe addressing an Elizabethan version of Reid Barbour:

Should we (as you) borrowe all out of others, and gather nothing of our selves, our names should be baffuld on everie Booke-sellers Stall, and not a Chandlers Mustard-pot but would wipe his mouth with our wast paper. Newe Herrings, new, wee must crye, every time we make our selves publike, or else we shall bee christened with a hundred new tytles of Idiotisme.

Shakespeare and the Secret Service

The Shakespeare Conspiracy

by Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman. London, 1994

Reviewed by Patrick Buckridge. Professor of English at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. Dr. Buckridge is author of The Scandalous Penton: A Biography of Brian Penton (Brisbane, 1994).

This book is targeted at a general readership to whom Shakespeare is not much more than a name but who can be intrigued by a nice bit of detective work designed to show that ‘the Bard’ was a spy. The authors are not literature professors but part-time media studies lecturers and journalists with a background of working on “unsolved mysteries,” the most recent being the true identity of King Arthur.

The book has a number of irritating features: careless factual errors and poor proofreading are two, and the lengthy point by point summaries at the end of each of the sixteen chapters is another. The most irritating feature of all, however, is that the book actually undermines its own credibility by its insistence - after a show of judicious deliberation over the major alternatives (Bacon, Derby, Oxford and Marlowe) - that William Shakespeare of Stratford was indeed the author of the plays.

Readers with an Oxfordian perspective might be interested to know the grounds on which Phillips and Keatman are able to dismiss the Oxford claim in six pages. First of all, there’s the double mention in Meres’ *Palladis Tamia*: if Meres referred to both Oxford and Shakespeare as playwrights, then ‘it seems