



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Solon and Thespis: Law and Theater in the English Renaissance by Dennis D Kezar

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Dennis D. Kezar, ed. *Solon and Thespis: Law and Theater in the English Renaissance*.

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. viii + 294 pp. index. \$37.50. ISBN: 978-0-268-03313-2.

An ambivalent attitude to the law and to theater has occurred since antiquity. The Platonic Socrates explored the fraught relation between law and justice and between the poet and the republic. How could human laws be just and representation embody wisdom and knowledge? Theatrical and legal representation posed problems for the philosopher, who loved truth, and not the seductive ways of forensic argument or illusory role-playing.

Like Plato, Isocrates and Aristophanes commented on the theater. Aristophanes attacked the theater and philosophy in his Old Comedy satire, taking Socrates to task in *The Clouds* and taking a run at Euripides in *The Archanians* and *Peace*. In *The Frogs*, Aristophanes set up a debate between Aeschylus and Euripides, the one defending the poet as a teacher of morals and the other saying that the poet represents reality. Plato takes up this question in book 10 of *Republic* in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Plays have a specific power: "Dramatic poetry has a most formidable power of corrupting even men of high character, with a few exceptions" (605c, Cornford trans. 337). Such performance moves people in the audience to give themselves up to sympathy for actions that in life would be scorned, so that feeling overwhelms reason. Passion, language, and role-playing can, in drama or in law, obscure reality and the path to truth, knowledge, and wisdom. Although being more favorable to poetry and drama than Plato is, Aristotle still places philosophy above poetry, which is above history, because of its universal nature. In the Renaissance, however, Philip Sidney placed poetry over philosophy. And so the ancient world and its revision framed the debate of law and theater in the Renaissance.

This is one of the contexts for the volume Dennis Kezar has edited. The collection explores the relation between law and drama in the plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Marston, and others. The title of the collection comes from a meeting between Solon, an Athenian lawmaker, and Thespius, a Greek poet and actor, over whether lies in a play lead to falsehood in society. Role-playing and the relation between art and life are central in this debate. Why is the law real and drama a fiction? Why the friction between law and drama in early modern England when they shared spaces and rhetoric and both interpreted the social and the imaginary? Both involve fictions, so why are legal fictions of any more worth than dramatic ones?

The three parts of the Kezar's collection help approach some of these problems. In the first part, "Jonson and the Tribe of Law," Matthew Greenfield notes that the War of the Poets shows the tension between Roman law (Jonson) and common law (Dekker's use of a jury). Dekker trusted juries and the audience while Jonson did not. Paul Cantor argues that the seeming artlessness in form of *Bartholomew Fair* actually allows it to develop characters and content. The tension between law and spontaneity in this representation of the marketplace is one important manifestation of the relation between law and theatre. According to Frances Teague, setting *Volpone* in Venice rather than in London freed it from topicality, especially of the recent investigation and prosecution of those involved in the Gunpowder Plot. The law could be errant and assinine, badly conceived and full of perjury, and the consideration of the relations among law and lawlessness, nation and providence, is something that Teague draws out in drawing comparisons between the Gunpowder Plot and the plot of *Volpone*.

The second part, "Legal Rhetoric and Theatrical Pressure," begins with Heather Dubrow's discussion of land law in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and in his culture. Arguing for more notice of workaday law, such as land law, and in particular rules surrounding property disputes, Dubrow seeks to interpret the lawless world of this great play, invoking tensions over property as illuminations of anxieties over housing and being dislodged, as well as fears of trespass, which occur when Gloucester is driven from his house. Ernest B. Gilman discusses the law in *The Tempest*, especially in the buried story, or excluded trial, of Sycorax. This submerged world of Sycorax is something that Prospero and the audience need to consider in the birth of colonialism. Dennis Kezar, who also contributes a useful introduction to this collection, avers that in *The Witch of Edmonton* Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley produced challenges to representing witches in the Renaissance. This work plays on its own text, a drama that possesses its audience's desire as if a material possession.

In "Law Staged and Theory Troubled," the third part, Debora Shuger examines texts, lies, and censorship. She sees censorship as seeking to check falsehood rather than uncomfortable truths for those in power. While not defending censorship, Shuger raises questions about the purveyance of falsehood and fear in oppositional writing in Tudor and Stuart England. Karen J. Cunningham brings together the Inns of Court and *Gorbuduc* and tries to draw attention away from

court to mooted and to the Inns. Sackville, Norton, and the Inns of Court represent struggle in fictions in order to anticipate and prevent foreign reign. The law and theater secure the nation in the imagination. Luke Wilson analyzes corruption in seventeenth-century England and focuses on Chapman's *Tragedy of Chabot* and the case against Bacon for bribery. This play explores the connection between corruption in public office and the bond between king and subject founded in generosity and dependence.

In the epilogue, Deak Nabers offers ideas about legal theory, for instance how Lear and Gloucester raise the issue of natural law at 4.6.148–56. In summing up, Nabers points out, as the collection does, that the law is the center of the world and of its disappearance, which is a little like theater. They represent the world in a fiction of the world that claims truth. They have integrity and question it. This tension is one of the reasons the collection that Kezar has shaped is worth exploring.

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