

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Natalia Pikli, *Shakespeare's Hobby-Horse and Early Modern Popular Culture*  
(Routledge, 2022). 272 pp. ISBN 9780367515195**

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Natalia Pikli's lively, engaging and comprehensive study of the hobby-horse in early modern popular culture and drama, part of Helen Ostovich's Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama series, consists of five chapters, each of which is divided into clear and helpfully subtitled multiple sections (each also comes with its own separate bibliography as well as notes): 'The hobby-horse and the early modern morris dance'; 'Living nostalgia and the cluster of allusions around 1600'; 'Gender, prejudice, and popular dramatic medleys'; 'The hobby-horse in university plays and on politicized public stages'; and 'Hobby-horses in cheap print and iconography (1610s-1635)'. It also includes a small but valuable selection of illustrations.

The clear and detailed introduction explains the five meanings of the hobby-horse which might be found in early modern writing, including a breed of small real horses (the Irish hobby), the wickerwork costume worn by performers which we probably think of when we hear the word hobby-horse, a children's toy, a foolish or gullible person, and a loose woman. Pikli is of course interested mainly in the second of these meanings, but the others may colour or leach into references to hobby-horse costumes and their wearers, and this is especially relevant because, as Pikli astutely shows, the hobby-horse can stand as a symbol of popular culture and customs and a key marker of aesthetic preferences; put very crudely, it is a sort of essence of what distinguishes Shakespeare (who mentions hobby-horses in five of his plays) from Jonson. Demonstrating that references to hobby-horses peak in the years around 1600, Pikli suggests intriguingly that Falstaff, across the three plays in which he appears, 'dramatizes the ambiguous fate of popular festivities in the last decade of Elizabethan times, when they become "forgotten"' (p. 19). After 1601 the hobby-horse fades, to the extent that Pikli contends that 'By the end of the Jacobean period, attitudes to popular culture, especially in the theatre, changed so radically that the Caroline period substantiates a different phase' (p.

22); she therefore calls for future critical attention to be devoted to Caroline plays featuring hobby-horses by Shirley, Sampson and Brome. She might have added Ford's *The Lady's Trial*, because I now see that what is there referred to as a cock-horse is in fact a hobby-horse; this illustrates the difficulty of identifying allusions to hobby-horses which Pikli discusses in her introduction, but shows too the value of her study in raising awareness of the topic.

The book is excellently grounded in scholarship on popular culture but never gets bogged down in parading its learning. Chapter one begins with a consideration of literacy rates in the period and the spread of print culture. It then moves on to considering the cultural phenomenon of nostalgia in general (and specifically the sense of a lost Merry England) before offering a history of morris dancing. Chapter two includes Will Kemp's famous dance and also considers *The Entertainment at Althorp*, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, and the 1609 *Old Meg of Herefordshire* (where Maid Marian was supposedly played by a woman who claimed to be around 110 years old and to have been 'at Prince Arthur's death at Ludlow' (p. 85)). There is a particularly interesting section on the perhaps unexpected role of hobby-horses in the War of the Theatres which leads up to an illuminating examination of *Hamlet*. This chapter concludes with the claim that 'hobby-horse and other equine references feature in the playwrights' dramatic and theatrical rivalry in a way that sheds light on authorial attitudes to popular culture, and also informs us about varying tastes and aesthetics both in the theatre of the time and in contemporary printed literature' (p. 109). Chapter three offers the heady mixture of analyses of references to hobby-horses in *Blurt Master Constable*, *The Valiant Welshman*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Othello*, *The Honest Whore*, Part 2 and *Epicene*, and touches too on *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, while chapter four takes us to the less familiar territory of plays such as George Ruggle's *Ignoramus* and Barten Holiday's *Technogamia* and a glance at the three *Parnassus* plays before moving on to *The Winter's Tale* and *Bartholomew Fair* and then *Women Pleased* and *The Witch of Edmonton*. Finally chapter five pays particular attention to emblem books, especially those of George Wither, and to accounts of children's toy hobby-horses, which might sometimes appeal to adults too (Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* suggests that hobby-horses were used to entertain 'savages', although Henry Peacham figured those who boasted of exploring and exploiting the New World as the ones who fell for trifles such as hobby-horses). There is also an illuminating discussion of John Taylor the Water Poet. I've always wanted to know what Hamlet meant by 'the hobby-horse is forgot'; now I finally do.