EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Darren Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare's Borrowed Feathers: How early modern playwrights shaped the world's greatest writer* (Manchester University Press, 2024). ISBN 978-1-5261-7732-2. £25.00 (hbk).

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The myth that Shakespeare borrowed language and dramaturgical models from his contemporaries originated in his own time, notably with the first printed reference to him: Robert Greene's infamous pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance*, printed in 1592. Writing in the persona of Roberto, Greene — a university-educated dramatist and fiction writer — attacks the provincial Shakespeare, identifying him as the 'Shakescene', for adorning his writing (or acting style) with the 'feathers' — that is, primarily decorous language — of his peers. Roberto's words have not been ignored by generations of scholars, stimulating extensive research into Shakespeare's borrowings and the influences of his contemporaries on his writing. The nature and extent of these borrowings — and the textual evidence that supports them — have preoccupied scholars and editors since the eighteenth century, when the first editors and textual scholars began conducting analysis of the composition of Shakespeare's style. The initial aim was to determine chronology and authorship of his plays. To a large extent, the analysis of style is used as a tool for debates about dating and chronology in modern textual scholarship. Greene's pamphlet is the fulcrum of Darren Freebury-Jones's bold, insightful, meticulously researched, and lively book as well. Although Greene, a prolific and innovative playwright who collaborated with Thomas Lodge, did not co-write with Shakespeare — possibly, as Freebury-Jones astutely suggests, because of the impact of his own pamphlet — his influence on Shakespeare is nonetheless evident. Greene provided both themes and structural models for how to develop them in new plays, such as courtly corruption and even cross-dressing that appear in Shakespeare's later plays. This line of critical inquiry

reaches a high point in Freebury-Jones's book, which explores 'Shakespeare's working relationships with contemporary playwrights' (p. 4). Through micro-analyses and intricately detailed explorations of different elements of verbal style, Freebury-Jones examines an impressing array of interactions between Shakespeare and his contemporaries. His book consolidates a wide range of evidence involving language, versification, dramatic structure, and themes, for Shakespeare's collaboration and creative exchanges, showing that these borrowings were not only apparent to fellow writers but also deeply embedded in the competitive, profit-driven environment of the commercial theatre. In this world Shakespeare operated as a practical man of the theatre and a playing company, shaped by and shaping the culture of dramatic writing around him.

Freebury-Jones's expertise in and knowledge of early modern drama equips him to undertake this big task with fluency and persuasive depth. While not every reader may find each piece of evidence equally convincing, the result is a book rich in empirical data, carefully juxtaposed and largely free from speculative distractions, even if some level of rigorously controlled speculation is inevitable in assigning meaning to the effects of these borrowings. Freebury-Jones always chooses examples that clearly reveal almost verbatim and perfect matches, making his examples convincing. This scholarly excavation combines both traditional and innovative analytical methods. The traditional approach involves the manual cataloguing of words and, especially, phrases; the modern method employs the N-gram computer-generated database developed by Pervez Rizvi. This tool provides spreadsheet-style summaries of plays by Shakespeare's major contemporaries, with 'N' representing the number of words in phrases and collocations. The N-gram resource serves as a crucial foundation for the granular analysis of stylistic forms and verbal patterns. The book argues that similarities between Shakespeare's texts and those of his contemporaries stem from his 'associative memory' (p. 17), honed through theatrical training and his background as an actor. These stylistic correspondences may result from unconscious transmission, while Shakespeare's distinctive use of repetition functions as both an echo of shared stylistic norms and a marker of his unique expressive touch. One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its emphasis on his 'aural understanding' (p. 30) of the verbal worlds crafted by his contemporaries — a key creative force in the evolution of his dramatic writing across the entire canon of plays.

Freebury-Jones provides the background for Shakespeare's sensitivity to the relationship between dramatic genres, stage conditions, and writing style. For example, composing 'sensational dynamic fight scenes' (p. 26) required not only physical staging but also

rhetorical skill — particularly the use of *copia*, or the elaborate and decorative development of language, which he would have learned during his grammar school education. Freebury-Jones makes a strong case for the value of 'paying close attention to the different ways Shakespeare and his early modern contemporaries employed rhetoric in their plays,' arguing that uncovering these processes of composition sheds 'fresh light on authorial styles' (p. 15). Such styles can be especially difficult to identify during the earliest phase of Shakespeare's career, a period complicated by questions of authorship and chronology. As Freebury-Jones demonstrates through his analysis of connotative and phraseological correspondences, this method 'has important implications for plays of uncertain authorship' (p. 15), particularly Shakespeare's early works. However, the means by which phrases and collocations found their way into Shakespeare's texts — or those of his contemporaries — remains unclear. Acting, reading, collaboration, or shared theatrical environments could all have been sources of the verbal material linking Shakespeare to other playwrights of his time.

This kind of research also has important implications for illuminating the stylistic interactions between Shakespeare and individual playwrights. The degree and scope of phrases and collocations that link Shakespeare with other writers vary significantly; for instance, there are qualitative and structural differences in the impact of John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Kyd. While Lyly was influential in shaping Shakespeare's early dramaturgy — particularly in plot design — micro-analysis of their shared vocabulary reveals that Lyly's language had limited impact on Shakespeare's style. Marlowe, by contrast, represents a distinctive case. The chapter on Marlowe ambitiously documents the major borrowings from all of his plays, while also demonstrating that Shakespeare 'deliberately avoids'(p. 46) directly paraphrasing him. Shakespeare engages not only with Marlowe's language but also with the structural aspects of his dramaturgy. Once Freebury-Jones uncovers a significant corpus of shared collocations, patterns begin to emerge: in similar dramatic situations, for example, Marlowe tends to use the interrogative mode, while Shakespeare often opts for the imperative. The imperative becomes Shakespeare's way of intensifying dramatic language and performance — he borrows from Marlowe but adapts it to 'enflesh' his characters (p. 51). Kyd's influence on Shakespeare has long been underestimated. Freebury-Jones offers compelling evidence to support the claim that 'the impact of Kyd's language on Shakespeare's style was like an engineering brick through a window' (p. 80). Kyd's influence is especially evident in *The First Part of Henry VI*, a play marked by its stylistic diversity and complexity. The text features stylistic 'blocks' that suggest the presence of a 'stylistic community' (p. 106), with rhetorical

richness revealing unmistakable traces of Kyd's craftsmanship. In *Arden of Faversham*, a domestic tragedy, Freebury-Jones argues for single authorship, showing that the play's stylistic consistency and use of rhyme closely align with Kyd's rhyming habits and forms.

Christopher Marlowe's neoclassical style is markedly more disciplined than Shakespeare's, and Freebury-Jones carefully assesses the range of differences between them, as well as the various traces of Marlowe's style and dramaturgy in early Shakespeare. *Edward II* served as a template for *Richard II* not only in its dramatization of royal authority — an often-noted connection — but also in the smallest units of language, where 'clusters of stylistic markers' (p. 177) reveal points of contact and divergence. Shakespeare consistently engages in dialogue with the styles of his contemporaries; in the case of Marlowe, he is particularly effective in transforming Marlowe's use of interrogatives and grammatical mood shifts, notably by reshaping Marlowe's imperatively driven line. While these may appear to be subtle shifts, Freebury-Jones shows that they significantly shape the sound of Shakespeare's verse and lend distinctiveness to his stylistic and verbal amplification. Despite his indebtedness to Marlowe, Shakespeare's appropriation and transformation of Marlovian verse is far from 'slavish imitation' (p. 52); rather, it constitutes a verse style that is meaningfully distinct. Compared to the dramatic style of university-educated playwrights — Marlowe among them — Shakespeare's verbal style stands apart. His early hyperbolic tendencies differ from the bombastic tone of Marlowe, even as they respond to it. In some cases, Shakespeare's stylistic affinities with other dramatists are even more pronounced. His phrasemaking, for instance, bears a strong resemblance to that of John Marston, and Freebury-Jones identifies 'striking narrative similarities' (p. 157) between them, documenting connections that had not previously been explored.

Freebury-Jones's analytical method of unpacking textual structure demonstrates that, in order to understand what it meant to be original within the culture of transmission in which Shakespeare worked, we must examine what came immediately before and during the time he wrote. This allows us to see how Shakespeare's texts were both uniquely his own and part of the broader continuum of Elizabethan poetics, characterized by an amplified verbal medium. The method used in this book also shows how surprisingly close the verbal idiom of individual writers is, indicating that dramatic production in the late Elizabethan period constituted a literary system of styles. The 'borrowed' phrases and collocations in Shakespeare's work highlight the stylistic differences between him and his contemporaries, as well as the persistent and ingenious intertextual dialogue among their texts. Freebury-Jones persuasively shows that Shakespeare innovated in order to sound authentic and

individual within this collaborative milieu, frequently amplifying and intensifying the dramatic effects of the language he borrowed. The book makes a compelling case for the value of 'traditional techniques' (p. 96) of stylistic analysis as precise and insightful tools for assessing the effects of these intertextual relationships on Shakespeare's verse.

Shakespeare's Borrowed Feathers brims with discoveries and original insights into the formation of Shakespeare's dramatic style, the evolution of that style throughout his oeuvre, and the way 'borrowing' became an artistic practice that shaped the distinctive expressive form and tone of late Elizabethan drama. It demonstrates how stylistic transactions between playwrights extended into dramatic meaning on stage and how style and actorly performance were intricately connected. While Freebury-Jones presents Shakespeare as the culmination of these intertextual exchanges, his book also encourages scholars to undertake similar investigations — using comparable methodologies — into the formation of the styles and writing practices of those playwrights who influenced Shakespeare. Such studies will deepen our understanding of the complexity of Elizabethan dramatic writing and the literary culture in which style functioned not only as a vehicle for dramatic meaning but also as a cultural index.