



Sarah Briest, *Married to the City: The Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show, Between Emblematics and Ritual* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2019), ISBN 978-3-8253-6889-0, 220 pages, €35

Reviewed by

Jennifer Allport Reid

(Birkbeck, University of London, UK)

Sarah Briest's book takes as its subject the London Lord Mayor's Show, the annual civic ceremony which accompanies a new mayor's inauguration and which, from the first half of the sixteenth century, began to develop elaborate pageants which were staged at various points around the city.¹ The Show reached its heyday in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, with familiar dramatists such as Heywood, Middleton, Dekker, and Munday taking turns to devise and organise the entertainments, which often then appeared in print as souvenirs or supplements to the event itself: yet, as Tracey Hill notes, 'despite their undoubted importance in their own day, as well as for our understanding of early modern civic culture and for an appreciation of the full diversity of the careers of a number of high-profile writers, the Shows have too often been sidelined by modern scholars'.² Briest's study, focusing chiefly on the Shows of the seventeenth century which are well-attested in both pamphlet form and in eyewitness accounts, therefore provides a fresh and welcome new addition to a topic which is still relatively neglected by scholars both of early modern London and of festive culture.

The book falls into roughly two halves, with the first two chapters dedicated to debunking a scholarly trend, identified in the introduction, which argues – or 'merely state[s] casually' (9) – that the Shows are 'emblematic' in nature. Rather, Briest asserts, 'Lord Mayor's Show pageantry cannot adequately be described as "emblematic" when that designation is understood as relating specifically to emblem books and the tripartite text/image compositions found on their pages' (23). The interplay between picture, motto, and explanatory verse, Briest argues, is the source of a productive

'tension at the heart of an emblem' (26), 'a solvable discrepancy between the "seen" and its unseen allegorical meaning' (32). Chapters One and Two therefore outline the formal and thematic differences between the Shows and early modern emblem books. As she ably – indeed, exhaustively – demonstrates in the first chapter, the Shows were often too visually crowded to offer any obvious allegorical or moral interpretation: Anthony Munday's *Chrysanaleia* of 1616, for example, included a 'Chariot of Triumphal Victory' carrying fifteen personifications of vices and virtues (27), a veritable throng amongst which it must have been quite difficult to distinguish, say, Truth from Virtue and Honour, let alone to discern any more specific message than that of overall celebration and affirmation. Moreover, as the second chapter outlines, the ideological underpinnings of the two genres are often at odds, with the emblems frequently deploying a cynical worldliness that emphatically contrasts with the celebratory tone of the Shows. As she humorously points out,

If the characters who appear in Lord Mayor's Shows had, in fact, stepped from the pages of [...] popular emblem books [...], the nature of the show would have been significantly transformed. [...] [T]he splendid barges of civic dignitaries would not have arrived in triumph at Paul's Wharf but suffered shipwreck on the Thames. [...] Some merchants and company dignitaries might even have found themselves metamorphosed into monkeys (41).

Of course, such differences are the result of the emblem's purpose, to provide cautionary advice and moral admonition, and more could perhaps be made of the moments when the messages communicated by the two genres actually come rather close: as Briest briefly acknowledges, quoting Francis Bacon, 'telling Men, what they are' can be a covert way to 'represent to them, what they should be' (58). It is hard not to suspect that such a motive lay, in particular, behind the frequency of the dramatists' laudatory references to the new incumbent being a great patron of the arts (74).

While Briest certainly puts the case convincingly that it is unwise reflexively to refer to the Shows as 'emblematic', her consequent emphasis on transparency of meaning (and the spectacles' subsequent lack of an emblematically 'solvable discrepancy') can lead her to gloss over more peculiar and problematic appearances in the pageants which it would have been interesting to see explored in more depth. For example, the appearance in Munday's *Metropolis Coronata* (1615) of the famous outlaw Robin Hood could surely carry with it some implicitly problematic connotations for a celebration of civic and mercantile life, even if these were unintended by the author: similarly, Dekker's deployment in *Londons Tempe* (1629) of Vulcan as 'the image of [...] a happy and eager workman' (33) was perhaps not entirely straightforward, given that Vulcan was often derided as a cuckold.³ Although these potential ambiguities do not undermine Briest's argument, and in fact reinforce her point that the pageants did not contain the explicitly interpretive instructions of the emblem books, the first half of the book is strongest when it moves beyond an emphasis on transparent meaning to explore moments of ambivalence, tension, or conflict. In particular, the discussion of Sir Walter Raleigh's execution in 1618, deliberately timed to coincide with the Lord Mayor's Show in the hope of avoiding a large crowd of spectators and the attendant risk of unrest, demonstrates that there certainly was room for state-sanctioned dramas to escape the boundaries of their proscribed meanings (59–62). Briest persuasively argues for the

echoes between the execution and that year's Show: the latter, as Tracey Hill has previously noted, featured an unusual emphasis on ordinarily eschewed topics such as treason and ambition, while the execution itself 'unfold[ed] theatrically with the traditional procession to the place of execution and the opportunity for the condemned to direct his last words at the assembled spectators', an opportunity of which Raleigh 'made much' (61).⁴

The second half of the book comprises one long chapter, slightly longer than the first two together, which presents the original argument 'that the mayor's incorporation into his office in many ways mimics a wedding', representing a rite of initiation and incorporation for the mayor, and simultaneously 'conceptualizing London in terms of a [female] body' (21). The varied nuances and implications of this personification and feminisation of the city are examined in depth in Chapter Three, which explores the equivalence of the body of the Church being figured as the bride of Christ (particularly in the medieval precursor of the Lord Mayor's Show, the Corpus Christi processions) before going on to outline contemporary analogies between conquerable/defensible territories and the potentially vulnerable female body, and between the family unit and the structure of the state. The chapter presents a veritable smorgasbord of feminised images: '[t]he pregnant city, the city giving birth, the city as mother to its many and varied population' (140). As Briest shows, the comparison of London to the idealised female body offered writers a multivalent metaphor, by means of which the city variously appears as chaste bride, nurturing mother, even fecund garden. The trope could also invite problematic associations, however: the analogy with Jerusalem (the bride of Christ) inevitably 'also evokes images of Babylon' (152).

Drawing on Victor Turner, the chapter moves on to an excellent discussion of 'serious punning' in the Shows, before turning in its concluding pages to the question of inclusivity. As Briest acknowledges in the introduction, this is an issue with which scholars of civic pageantry are much occupied: in particular, whether pageantry functions as a 'normative and restrictive enforcement of established social norms and hierarchies' or whether, conversely, pageantry's chief function in the period is 'to facilitate solidarity and social cohesion' (14). The actively positive representation of lower-class labourers and apprentices, Briest argues, suggest the latter: the Lord Mayor's Show 'makes the promise of an inclusive and harmonious community in which the mayor is merely the first among equals' (182), and deliberately demonstrates to spectators their own place within that cohesive whole. If anything, this argument could have been incorporated more throughout the book: despite the occasional moments when the Shows suggest a less optimistic view of state power (Wat Tyler's head being carried on a dagger by 'Londons Genius, a comely Youth' (62) in 1616, for example, or the submerged references to London as the Whore of Babylon), the picture that emerges in *Married to the City* is of a festive event which, year after year, despite plagues, succession crises, wars and economic woes, remains determinedly optimistic in tone.

Perhaps the most unexpected revelation to emerge in the course of the book is that the Shows' relentlessly positive view of civic relations even outbalanced the more familiar jingoistic commonplaces of seventeenth-century England, such as its anti-Catholicism, racism, and xenophobia: these impulses, it appears, were subordinated to the more important message of urban harmony and peaceful prosperity, even by writers

who were on occasion more than happy to draw upon more bigoted discourses in stage plays or polemical pamphlets. Briest notes, but could perhaps make more of, the fact that despite intense naval rivalry with Spain in particular throughout this period, 'The Lord Mayor's Show [...] tended to focus on peaceful economic cooperation' (78) when it depicted relationships with other European and non-European nations; in a related vein, she devotes a detailed discussion to the surprisingly inclusive and tolerant depiction of ethnic diversity in the Shows, especially in the context of the casually unpleasant racism of the emblem books (89–101). Similarly, despite being set '[i]n a climate in which the capital's rapid expansion was predominantly seen as a threat to social order and public health', the 1637 Show (for example) vocalised a 'defiantly positive account of the diversity of London's rapidly growing population' (150). Perhaps most startlingly, the Shows even appear relatively 'free of religious dogmatism' (199); although this last is a topic which could certainly have been further developed, given the appearance in the Show of 1631, and again the following year, of St Katherine, the patron saint of Haberdashers. Briest does not comment on the tensions that this must have evoked for some onlookers in the light of protestant hostility towards the medieval saint cults that had been wiped out by the Reformation: and again, it is to be wished that a little more time had been given throughout *Married to the City* to those instances where the spectacle of the Lord Mayor's Show seems to be pulling against the tropes and attitudes of the time. Nevertheless, overall the case is well made that the Lord Mayor's Show was indeed 'more inclusive in its outlook than the majority of stage plays produced at the time' (199), and the book as a whole certainly offers a fresh look at an aspect of London's civic history which, readers should be convinced, merits far greater attention.

Notes

1. Anne Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre: City Drama and Pageantry from Roman Times to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 172.
2. Tracey Hill, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show 1585–1639* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 3–4.
3. Cf. Francesca Alberti, "'Divine cuckolds": Joseph and Vulcan in Renaissance Art and Literature', in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th century)*, ed. by Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 149–180.
4. Also cf. Hill, p. 300.

Works Cited

- Alberti, Francesca, "'Divine cuckolds": Joseph and Vulcan in Renaissance Art and Literature', in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th century)*, ed. by Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 149–180.
- Hill, Tracey, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show 1585–1639* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
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Note on contributor

Jennifer Allport Reid is currently completing a PhD at Birkbeck, University of London, exploring how customary culture intersects with popular forms in the early modern period, and the relationship of mutual influence between folklore and performed genres such as the theatre, sermons, and ballads. She has published on the relationship between early modern customary drama and Anthony Munday's Robin Hood plays (*The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, June 2017), and has chapters forthcoming on hunting customs in popular culture and Shakespearean comedy in *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Animals*, edited by Karen Raber and Holly Dugan, and on the folklore of being pixie-led in *Reading the Road, from Shakespeare's Crossways to Bunyan's Highways*, edited by Lisa Hopkins and Bill Angus (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). She is particularly interested in how customary culture expresses the beliefs and relationships of the early modern community, as well as how it reflects interactions between humans, animals, and the landscape.

To Cite this Article

Allport Reid, Jennifer, 'Review of: Sarah Briest, *Married to the City: The Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show, Between Emblematism and Ritual* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2019)'. Online at <http://literarylondon.org/reviewfiles/allportreid-briestreview.pdf>.