

James M. Bromley. *Clothing and Queer Style in Early Modern English Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp 220. Hardback \$80.00. ISBN: 9780198867821. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198867821.001.0001>.

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At once playful and persuasively insistent upon its own political urgency, James M. Bromley's *Clothing and Queer Style in Early Modern English Drama* provocatively and usefully asks queer critics to reconsider the relationship between our contemporary moment and the literary texts of the past, making the case for how city comedy might play into our negotiation of that question. This is a theoretically dense book, but one that rewards the careful reading required: Bromley's methodological work, particularly his development of the concept of 'cruisy historicism' he first proposed in a 2016 article, is fascinating and deserves to be taken seriously by scholars of early modern drama, urbanism, and queer theory alike.¹

In four chapters examining four city comedies — Ben Jonson's *Every Man In His Humour* and *Every Man Out Of His Humour*, Middleton's *Michaelmas Term*, and Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* — Bromley uses a study of the representation of male 'sartorial extravagance' (the 'queer style' of the title) in city comedy as an opportunity to rethink the relationship between early modern literary texts and present-day queer politics, affect, and desires. In doing so, he makes meaningful interventions in several other debates in early modern literary studies. One particularly compelling contribution is the new perspective he provides on the relationship between clothing and interiority in early modern English culture — one that effectively reclaims the concept of superficiality, arguing for the critical and ethical productivity of reading fashionable expression as irreverent and deliberately performative. Another is his demonstration (particularly in chapter 1) of new ways in which queer theory and disability theory can work together, and indeed develop each other through productive dialogue, moving beyond a focus on illuminating the representation of non-normative bodies.

Though each of the chapters develops its own distinct approach, all are linked by their desire to respond to critics who have seen city comedy as a genre that reinforces normative modes of being a man, relating to other men, and expressing masculinity. They are linked, too, by a generative mode of reading against the grain in which queer readings unlock aspects of the text that the authors have not chosen to foreground but have also not chosen to foreclose. In chapter 1, on *Every Man In His Humour*, Bromley's close reading exposes the weakness of

Justice Clement's authority, which opens up the authority of the play's judgment of what constitutes folly and its 'demarcation of a normative masculinity' (40). Bromley shows how this demarcation is achieved through the play's persistent concern with different kinds of authenticity: in identity, in style, in literature, in (dis)ability. In Chapter 2, on *Michaelmas Term*, the play is seen to provide queer sexual pedagogies — alternatives to a dominant, heteronormative sexual script which Middleton exposes as explicitly taught and imposed rather than naturalized 'almost in spite of itself' (110). The character of Quomodo appears in a new light as the 'pivot' of a 'queer community bound together by the circulation of knowledge and materials', in the sense of literal fabric (95). In chapter 3, on *The Roaring Girl*, analysis of the character of Jack Dapper (whose subjectivity and self-display are theorized as assemblage) and his 'non-standard masculinity' (148) — including an excellent discussion of the significations of his search for a 'spangled feather' — enables Bromley to 'excavate an imaginatively potent possibility within an early modern play that readers might otherwise cast aside' (149). In chapter 4, on *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Bromley 'examines the queer possibilities that we might reactivate in early modern texts through a reading practice of cruisy historicism' (157): an excitingly productive approach which applies the cruiser's appropriation of non-sexual spaces to texts and historical contexts 'understood as hostile to queer social and sexual practices' (151), and which is perhaps the book's greatest methodological contribution. Bromley's discussion of affect in relation to cruisy historicism is particularly engaging: in close dialogue with Valerie Traub, he argues that while unmoderated affective engagement with the past might be problematic, a more mindful and dialogic engagement has substantial political and critical potential. This persistent attention to the texts' queer possibilities not only illuminates the individual plays but demonstrates the potential of queer theory to unlock new ways of reading, in addition to — as Bromley underlines throughout the book — new ways of being. His epilogue then engages with debates concerning the merits of presentism and historicism, situating the question of the past's alterity in the context of the accusations of narcissism that can be levelled both at queer people and at presentist scholarship.

The book's playfulness makes it an often enjoyable read. Without wishing to spoil the opening of chapter 4 for future readers, I will say that in a field somewhat saturated with reappropriations of Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead, this particular chapter opening is by far the one that has made me laugh the most. Likewise, I hope more scholars will subsequently feel empowered to combine intellectual rigour with subtitles like 'All About the D' (50). The monograph

is also a deeply thought-provoking text, and one that deserves to prompt scholarly responses beyond those interested in drama or fashion. Of these potential further developments, perhaps the most urgent and obvious one is scholarship that places Bromley's work in dialogue with early modern trans studies. Without wishing to criticize this book for not being a different book, Bromley's refusal to contemplate trans valences for the queer style he analyzes does at times appear quite a stark omission. Trans people are mentioned twice in the book, both times as strictly present-day phenomena and both times as victims of discrimination and/or violence. Though much of the 'queer style' under discussion transgresses gender normativity as much as, if not more than, it connects to sexually transgressive desires and behaviour — as Bromley points out, *The Roaring Girl's* Jack Dapper 'reminds us that queer theorisation of nonnormative sexuality and non-normative gender go hand in hand' (148) — the insights of early modern trans studies scholars, most notably Marjorie Rubright's 2019 article on *The Roaring Girl*, go untapped.² Similarly, though Bromley positions his perspective as anti-essentialist throughout — indeed, the book closes with a desire to move beyond 'static biological essentialism' (193) — the play's bodies remain uncritically and essentially 'male', regardless of how (as Bromley's analysis shows) the texts might queer and undermine their masculinity. None of this negates the book's existing contributions but it certainly sets the stage for trans studies scholars to develop Bromley's work further. As he argues, 'utopian counterhistories are still possible to construct from the unlikeliest of historical contexts' (163). Our contemporary historical context remains — as is clear from both the political and the scholarly climate — an unlikely one for the construction of a utopian trans counterhistory, but Bromley's approach to the history of queer sexuality provides many important aspects of the blueprint.

Notes

- 1 James M. Bromley, 'Cruisy Historicism: Sartorial Extravagance and Public Sexual Culture in Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of his Humour*', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16.2 (2016), 21–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2016.0010>.
- 2 Marjorie Rubright, 'Transgender Capacity in Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1611)', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19.4 (2019), 45–74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2019.0037>.

