

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Gil Harris. *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. vi + 278 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4118-1.

Reviewed by Catherine Richardson (University of Kent)

Published on H-Albion (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser



## Bringing Temporality into Early Modern Materiality

“How might things chafe against the sovereignty of the moment-state? What do we do with things that cross temporal borders[?]... What, in short, is the time of the thing?” (p. 2). These are some of the thought-provoking questions with which Jonathan Gil Harris opens his book about the relationship between materiality and temporality. He explains the “untimely matter” of his title as the “polytemporality” of objects, their ability to draw attention to, partake in, and mediate various periods of the past in the present. This awareness of the way in which things look both forward and backward is not currently the focus of studies of early modern material culture, whose mode of analysis has by and large been “thick description”—the enmeshing of things as firmly as possible within a richly described, synchronic cultural context. But Harris uses Bruno Latour’s image of the toolbox which contains both an electric drill and a hammer (“The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands” [p. 3]) to explode the supposed coherence of these comforting temporal pockets which we slide around the objects of the past, and as he does so he opens up stimulating possibilities for early modern studies.

Harris uses the image of the palimpsest as a way of explaining the three particular temporal conceptions on which his book focuses. In the laying of texts on top of one another he sees a logic of “supersession” in which the newest writing needs the traces of the older in order to assert its triumph over the past. On the other hand, he sees a “temporality of explosion” as “the apparition of the

’old’ text shatters the integrity of the ’new’ by introducing into it a radical alterity that punctures the illusion of its wholeness or finality” (p. 15). But finally the subject matter of both texts might draw them into dialogue with one another and begin a conversation of sorts about their similarities and differences, and this is the “temporality of conjunction” (p. 16).

The three sections of *Untimely Matter* focus on these different temporal strands. “Supersessions” concentrates on George Herbert’s *The Temple* (1633) and Shakespeare’s second *Henriad*. Harris sees Herbert striving for progress away from worldly materiality, but achieving it only in a partial way in which “rematerialization and the untimely haunt his desire for a movement from fallen matter to pure spirit” (p. 64). The pursuit of the latter, he argues, is often conceived as a movement from East to West, a movement which Harris points out is not just geographical but also temporal: “the orient is past, the occident is to come” (p. 56). Shakespeare’s oriental past is a theatrical “Tamburlaine effect” (p. 78), in which the impersonation of Eastern power draws upon the excessive gestures and extravagant language of the mystery-play Herod who ranted in the streets of medieval towns. The Chamberlain’s Men’s deployment of this older style of acting Harris calls “intertheatricality,” a dramatic form which underlines their versatility and their modern skills even as it “transforms the actor’s body into a palimpsest of east and west, past and future” (p. 68).

Section 2, on “Explosions,” focuses on John Stow’s

record of a series of Hebrew characters on the stones of Ludgate wall in London. Harris argues that Stow “wants his readers to experience something of the strangeness of that encounter” (p. 103), lingering over their meaning in a way that gives them a curious power in the present of his text. The next chapter focuses on the smells generated in *Macbeth*—specifically the stink of gunpowder which, so soon after the gunpowder plot, is likely to have brought contemporary politics into play. But Harris also follows the theatrical meanings of stench to the devils of late medieval drama, arguing that “The play thus superimposed current political events upon archaic theatrical practice” (p. 128). And he connects both to an olfactory sensitivity altered by the Reformation, in which stink still signaled the devil, but sweet no longer indicated the presence of the divine.

The first chapter of “Conjunctions” ties Margaret Cavendish to Helen Cixous through their shared interest in Cleopatra. In a “conjunctive palimpsest” such as both writers offer, Harris tells us, they avoid “heterotemporality,” the “assumption of an absolute temporal difference between past and present,” by allowing things which are far apart in time to touch one another (p. 151). Finally, reviewing the vexed question of time in *Othello*, Harris argues that the play refuses linear temporality: “bringing into startling and anachronistic proximity supposedly distant and disparate moments” (p. 169). Making his own conjunction, of handkerchiefs, Harris uses Michel Serres’s notion that time is experienced like a folded handkerchief rather than a flat one to argue that “There are too many networks within which [Desdemona’s] acts for its meaning ever to settle” (p. 181).

This is a book with something to offer almost every “hot topic” in early modern studies—it contributes to debates about ethnicity and the conception of Eastern identities, to feminist theories of interconnection, and to historical phenomenology for a start. Harris is one of the foremost critics of the “new materialism,” and this book extends his previous thought-provoking critiques of a depoliticized “antiquarian” writing about material cul-

ture.[1] His conception of “matter,” for instance, stretches way beyond objects, and it would have been interesting to read some more explicit thoughts about what matter might mean in the end—time tends to take over here.

But this thinking about time is entrancing. It opens up so many possibilities for further criticism that it has the perhaps unfortunate effect of making Harris’s own examples seem like the almost randomly exposed tip of an iceberg. In many ways that is the point of course. Growing out of his analysis of the “touching” of points of time in Serres’s image of the crumpled handkerchief is an agenda for criticism which “requires the artful labor of the critic.” The critic’s backwards view is formative: we “create the past and the present, less in the sense of making them up than of persistently transforming the web of relations that tether the past to us—and us to it” (p. 174). It is the form of this web, the criteria for making connections, that needs more explicit attention, and Harris’s attempts to address this issue are considerably more subtle than those of the majority of “presentists.”

The idea at the heart of this book is a really smart one, and it is deftly argued. The theory is heavy in relation to the textual analysis, but in similar measure to his complex theorization, Harris offers appealing prose and clear and well-chosen examples. The kind of connections he is trying to make means that he often paints with a broad brush and further work will be needed to tease methodologies from the theories of *Untimely Matter*. But then his essential premise is truly exciting—well worth the effort. It should alter the way material criticism proceeds by changing the temporal boundaries of its object of study—just what is early modern material culture when matter begins to show its various ages?

#### Note

[1]. See for instance Jonathan Gil Harris, “The New New Historicism’s Wunderkammer of Objects,” *European Journal of English Studies* 4, no. 2 (2000): 111-123; and “Shakespeare’s Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2001): 479-491.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Catherine Richardson. Review of Harris, Jonathan Gil, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23690>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.