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Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/3914

Publisher: Shakespeare's Globe

Please cite the published version.
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It is an honest and rare author who admits to misgivings about the title imposed by his series editors, especially when it's the and he finds problematic. In this erudite book Martin Wiggins, although no poststructuralist, dissolves into a continuum the binary 'Shakespeare' and 'his contemporaries'. Shakespeare's rise in the mid-1590s was due, Wiggins contends, not to unique personal qualities but the absence of rivals: Greene, Marlowe, Kyd, Peele, and Lyly were gone and Jonson, Dekker, Marston, and Chapman had not arrived.

Wiggins maps the dramatic terrain from three triangulation points: Marlowe's redefinition of tragedy with Tamburlaine (1587), Chapman's invention of 'humours' comedy in A Humorous Day's Mirth (1597) and Marston's importation of Guarini's tragicomedy with his Antonio plays and The Malcontent (1600-03). This genre-centered approach yields many new solutions to old problems. If all a comedy's characters are 'humorous', whither the company clown's specialism? Chapman, and Shakespeare following him, gave the clown new work as a serious seer, which explanation improves considerably on the usual ad hominem account of Robert Armin succeeding William Kempe. Shakespeare emerges here as a great "completer" of advances begun by others and thus fully deserving of Robert Greene's proleptic epithet "beautified with our feathers".

200 words

Gabriel Egan