# Book Review

JONATHAN P. LAMB



**Matthew Hunter, *The Pursuit of Style in Early Modern Drama: Forms of Talk on the London Stage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.**

It is not easy to write a book on style. This difficulty arises, in part, because "style" can refer to a property specific to a particular writer—as when we mention Shakespeare's style, for instance—but also to an abstract, transferrable property—as when we exhort someone to write in a "familiar style." The difficulty arises, moreover, because the task of writing a book on style cues readers to pay close attention to the style of the book itself. It arises, still further, because a concern for style can quickly detach itself from the social world that gives styles meaning. Style as paradox, as distraction, and as antisocial: these are no mean challenges, and Matthew Hunter's *The Pursuit of Style in Early Modern Drama* energetically faces them all.

This is a delightful book, and sometimes difficult. Its central claim is that the early modern English theater produced kinds of talk (i.e., styles) that gave form to social relations in an increasingly anonymous city of London. Plays, Hunter argues, "offered their audiences imitable models of conversational competence, of forms of talk for mastering the task of talk" (8). These talk types (not to say genres) gave people a script for sociability in the sea of strangers London had become by the late sixteenth century. "Stage talk," for instance (the subject of chapter 1), emerges from Christopher Marlowe's much-imitated *Tamburlaine* as a style affording distance between speaker and hearer, thus providing playgoers with a "compellingly theatrical model of publicness" (58). "Love talk," the subject of chapter 2, relies upon clichés not just to reflect erotic affections but to gener-

*Genre*, Vol. 56, No. 3 December 2023
DOI 10.1215/00166928-10779309 

ate them. Hunter therefore brilliantly reads *Romeo and Juliet* as showing "how love conscripts the most publicly circulated linguistic forms so that it might be experienced as a private, self-generated, and formless event" (86). The familiar forms of love produce the experience of love's authenticity.

A secondary aspect of this book's argument is that the ensuing imitations of the various kinds of talk Hunter so compellingly identifies and describes—stage talk, love talk, court talk, tough talk, and plain talk—necessarily fall short. If the scripted talk of drama provided playgoers with an idealized, perfected version of styles, then offstage imitations cannot quite achieve the same shine. This necessary diminishment (which Hunter calls "etiolation," his favorite term in the book's impressively documented introduction) confirms the stage's central place in the development of the early modern English social imagination. I found this aspect of Hunter's argument less persuasive because the evidence for those failed, offstage imitations comes in the form of dramatic, poetic, or otherwise fictional representations of that failure. Claiming in chapter 1, for instance, that "stage talk is carried over from the stage into other social interactions," Hunter offers as evidence a Joseph Hall satire, Shakespeare's Pistol, and a character in Ben Jonson's *The Case is Altered* (77). The idea seems to be that offstage "etiolations" of style had grown so common that these writers were simply representing them. But representational texts are not the same as evidence of actual playgoers attempting to reuse the styles they encountered in the theater, even if these texts suggest that such imitations occurred.

Easily my favorite chapter of *The Pursuit of Style in Early Modern Drama* is chapter 2, which turns *Romeo and Juliet*'s familiarity among most readers (early modern and modern) into a stage for Hunter's argument: the play "embraces rather than dismisses the most decorated and overdone expressions of love in order to script love talk as an experience, paradoxically, of passion instead of as a script" (110). Hunter shows how the very play that has become synonymous with love talk takes love talk as its central concern. Other chapters offer similarly impressive readings: chapter 3 shows the way John Lyly's euphuistic style (named after the title character of his prose romance *Euphues*) circulated as "court talk." Chapter 4 shows how railing, satiric, vituperative, "tough talk" gives embodiment to an otherwise anonymous, abstract public. And chapter 5 argues that the cluster of plays known as city comedies stage a key contrast between "plain talk" (more familiarly known as the plain style) and other styles. Even if we could come up with more talk types ("witty talk" comes to mind, as does "friend

talk"), Hunter's range more than suffices to tell the story of how style gave form to talk in early modern England.

Two features of this book deserve special mention. The first is Hunter's downright breathtaking efforts to situate the book's argument in a big, broadly defined field of early modern English studies. Hunter does not just name-check but actively interacts with an impressive array of scholarship on drama, theater, poetry, prose, culture, language, style, and beyond. To point out areas Hunter does not manage to address—for instance, to note that recent scholarship has shown how the *Book of Common Prayer* gave form to publicness long before the stage did—simply calls attention to the achievement of the book's scholarly reach.

The second feature is Hunter's use of the technique known as close reading. If we literary scholars find ourselves in the exhausting later phase of a so-called method war over what we do and how (with John Guillory's *Professing Criticism* [2022] the latest attempt at a cease-fire), then Hunter's book offers a salutary and indeed refreshing reminder of how effective close reading can be as the principal method of literary criticism. Hunter draws clear and explicit lines between, on the one hand, fine details of lexis, versification, rhetorical figures, and linguistic forms and, on the other, an ambitious argument about the theater's crucial place in early modern England. To choose just one example, Hunter's reading of Rosalind's epilogue to *As You Like It* as a species of euphuism is one of the best interpretations of the speech I have ever read (148–49).

To sum up, then: Hunter reverses the impulse to separate style from its social embeddedness, and he thoughtfully navigates the wily capacity of style to be, like genre, both personal and public property. Hunter's own style, moreover, makes *The Pursuit of Style in Early Modern Drama* a joy to read, even if its use of what I will call "academic talk" hardly escapes notice. If readers walk away from this book highly conscious of the signature features of the academic style—"X is routed through Y"; "nothing so much as"; "X is not long to seek"; "it is X that Y"; "in X no less than in Y"—then it is another testimony to the persuasiveness of Hunter's argument. Talk gives academics, too, a way to become public.

**Jonathan P. Lamb** is associate professor of English at the University of Kansas. He is author of *Shakespeare in the Marketplace of Words* (2017), and he is currently writing a book titled *How the World Became a Book in Shakespeare's England*. He is also editing Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* for the Cambridge Shakespeare Editions series.