Document généré le 4 juin 2025 22:53

**Renaissance and Reformation**
**Renaissance et Réforme**

# Horbury, Ezra. Prodigality in Early Modern Drama

Dan Breen

Volume 44, numéro 1, hiver 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081169ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37080

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Breen, D. (2021). Compte rendu de [Horbury, Ezra. Prodigality in Early Modern Drama]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, *44*(1), 258–260. https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37080

© All Rights Reserved Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.
https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.
Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.
https://www.erudit.org/fr/

Se servant de traductions existantes ou en proposant de nouvelles, les anthologistes ont pu compiler les écrits d'une quarantaine de voyageurs. Ainsi taillés et disposés, comme s'ils appartenaient à un seul continuum et un seul déterminisme historique, ces récits de voyage en Asie, en Afrique et en Amérique témoignent de la genèse ethnographique et cartographique d'une entreprise d'implantation coloniale, marchande et esclavagiste qui galvanisera l'Europe tout entière.

FRANÇOIS PARÉ
University of Waterloo
https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37079

**Horbury, Ezra.**
***Prodigality in Early Modern Drama.***
Studies in Renaissance Literature 37. Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2019. Pp. ix, 284. ISBN 978-1-84384-542-3 (hardcover) $130.

Jesus's parable of the prodigal son, which appears only in the Gospel of Luke, was one of the most well-known stories from the New Testament in both the medieval and early modern periods. Its prevalence in sermons, commentaries, and vernacular paraphrases across the temporal and confessional divides of the Reformation has been the subject of significant inquiry, recently by scholars such as Mary Raschko and Pietro Delcorno. But the presence of the prodigal son extends well beyond the church or the university, into other forms of cultural production. In *Prodigality in Early Modern Drama*, Ezra Horbury assesses prodigal son plays in order to examine the role of the stage in shaping early modern interpretations of this figure. In these plays, Horbury suggests, a crucial and overlooked dimension of the prodigal son's moral status emerges: namely, his inclination to financial excess, a characterization that Horbury links to a revitalized interest in Aristotle's *Ethics*. Prodigality is associated with the more well-known vices of lechery and riotous behaviour, but it is ultimately rooted in almost compulsive financial extravagance. Surprisingly, the prodigal character received varying dramatic treatments. Generally reviled in sixteenth-century interludes, prodigals become more sympathetic in the seventeenth century before returning in triumph to the Restoration stage, transformed

as rakes and fops. Horbury suggests that the morally suspect character of financial prodigality became occluded by the expansion of the Restoration-era British economy: extravagant spending was, in this context, a disposition to be emulated rather than rejected. Prodigal son plays, by emphasizing the financial character of prodigality, highlight the role of the stage in contributing to an important chapter of English social and economic history.

The earliest plays in this tradition approach prodigality as a fault that can be amended only through the application of pedagogical discipline. This amendment was only made legible, however, in the outward performance of a series of social conventions. Later plays developed further the implications of the relationship between theatricality and personal reformation. In a persuasive reading of the *Henry IV* plays, Horbury suggests that Hal's understanding of his own maturation is controlled by his apprehension of education, kingship, and the relationship between fathers and sons primarily as defined by dramatic convention. In addition, Hal's prodigality must be considered through Falstaff's, whose extravagant spending Hal enables. Hal's own equivocal attitude toward reform, coupled with Falstaff's perpetually unreformed behaviour, suggests not an outright condemnation of prodigality but a more circumspect assessment, one that shades closer to admiration as Hal becomes Henry V.

Such admiration is more explicit in Jacobean and Caroline drama, in which the prodigal becomes less a vessel for the demonstration of moral principle than a generally sympathetic agent in a wider moral economy. Both men and women prodigals in city comedies spend compulsively in order to prosecute socially illicit sexual desires and to amass sometimes bewilderingly extensive collections of luxury items, particularly clothing. Grafted into the moral logic of comedy, such prodigal characters experience forms of comic punishment that, as Horbury shows in accounts of plays by Middleton, could serve either to reinforce or to satirize social norms. This shift in emphasis in later prodigal son plays is significant. While they continue the associations of prodigality with financial excess, their collective critical lens begins to focus as much on the characters who represent social convention as on the prodigals themselves. In a fascinating chapter on the significance in prodigal son plays of the figure of the usurer, Horbury suggests that this typically grasping, miserly, and sexually resentful figure serves as a double for the prodigal's father. Whereas in earlier plays the prodigal's father is celebrated as a figure of Aristotelian moderation, the usurer—typically depicted as significantly older than the prodigal—provides

through his miserliness an instance of a different kind of economic behaviour that must be reformed. By emphasizing the immorality of parsimony, the usurer allows the prodigal to be understood as representing social behaviour that, though undisciplined, contains a genuinely corrective capacity.

A chapter extending the analysis up to the return of the prodigal to the Restoration stage would have been helpful in demonstrating precisely how the changing economic attitudes of the late seventeenth century are reflected in theatrical representations of prodigality. The book takes up this subject most directly at the end of its second chapter, where Horbury suggests that the decline of dramatic interest in the prodigal son plot in the mid-seventeenth century may have been driven in some measure by the diminishing influence of Aristotle. This seems persuasive, but it also raises an important question: What intellectual or ethical principles emerge as the figure of the prodigal is transformed or effaced, and how are these principles treated in dramatic representation as justifications for behaviour previously considered "prodigal"? A chapter devoted specifically to this subject would enable the book to engage with related work in literary studies by scholars such as Rebecca Lemon, and in economic and ethical history especially by Brad Gregory, whose *Unintended Reformation* provides an extremely useful context for Horbury's argument. This suggestion, however, should be read as a testament to the strength of Horbury's book, rather than as the beginning of an assertion that its treatment of its subject is somehow seriously flawed. Horbury's analyses are excellent, the book's integration of a wide variety of critical perspectives is extremely impressive, and its contribution to literary studies is significant. Moreover, the book is surprisingly timely. Although published prior to the pandemic, Horbury notes in his Introduction that power structures in the west have for some time been moving in the direction of an understanding of economic austerity as fundamentally virtuous. *Prodigality in Early Modern Drama* generates a series of important and useful perspectives on the limitations of this thinking, and gestures in the direction of models of liberal—and perhaps "excessive"—spending that describe very different and more outward-looking systems of virtue.

DAN BREEN
Ithaca College
https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37080