

Literature, Learning, and Social Hierarchy in Early Modern Europe.

Ed. Neil Kenny.

Proceedings of the British Academy 246. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xiv + 292 pp. \$100.

Many prominent passages from early modern literature expose the entangled connections that books, education, and social standing held throughout the period. In this volume, Neil Kenny, as editor, and twelve other contributors set out to explore the junction between literacy, learning, and social hierarchy in chapters that survey a diverse geographical, social, and literary spectrum and delve into topics as varied as the relationship between learning and the vernacular, women's literacy and education, the role of publishers in the construction of authorship, marginalized groups and social mobility, and more.

Arranged into four parts according to different “angles of approach” (9), the sequence moves from more extensive inquiries into particular case studies. The editor and the authors consciously renounce a more comprehensive or systematic approach to showcase a miscellaneous sampling of methods to “unlock different facets of the relation of literature and learning to social hierarchy” (4). Notwithstanding this variegated approach, Kenny points toward tendencies that recur in the analysis and that, albeit in an oblique manner, reappear across the pages of the publication—namely, that literature and learning “tended to be supportive of and constitutive of social hierarchy, rather than corrosive of it” (5); that elites benefited the most from this connection; and that, in general, the language of literature and learning during this period helped reinforce social hierarchy and often reify the idea that learning was power. Still, many of the examined cases expose the porosity of social structure in connection to education, literary prestige, and ideas of virtue, nobility, dignity, and degree.

While the link between learning and hierarchy constitutes the basic groundwork for many classical approaches to the early modern age, the connection has been normalized to a point where it appears almost natural. In this sense, the invitation to revisit this intersection seems particularly appealing, especially since access to digital archives, libraries, and databases allows scholars to gauge this correlation in overlooked subjects of inquiry, as many of the chapters in the volume endeavor to do. In the three chapters that comprise the first part of the volume, the authors assess the role that language and its acquisition played in both the perpetuation and reorganization of hierarchy, and focus on relatively unattended groups, including traditional communities, educated women, and skilled artisans. The book's second part focuses on the connection between cultural production and the construction of social status in chapters where the authors focus on the ways in which publishers, actors, and poets managed to carve out places for themselves within a shifting social system. The last two parts offer avenues into

particular case studies from the construction of (self-)image and status in drama to the role that the developing publishing industry played in the cultural formations of the period.

I enjoyed Warren Boutcher's broad historical overview of the interrelation between new social literacies and traditional hierarchies that focuses on celebrated vernacular texts by Michel de Montaigne and Shakespeare while inviting us to rethink and explore this connection in different locations, including the Americas. I also found Jane Stevenson's examination of the remarkable case of Latin poet Maria Marchina, and the mesh of circumstances that enabled her to climb up the social ladder by means of skill, talent, and education, to be an enticing invitation to further inspect the association between knowledge and social standing among other so-called "women prodigies" (140) of the period. In this same manner, Susan Wiseman's exploration of the "formation of a set of ideas, images, and expectations making the entity of the 'Gypsy'" (182) opens up the conversation for more discriminating approaches in the field of Romani studies to study a social group that has often been superseded by its literary stereotype. Colin Furrow's closing chapter on publishing houses and the construction of authorship was particularly illuminating because of its comparative approach to a question that is often addressed in an individualized manner for specific conspicuous authors of the period. As a whole, the publication manages aptly to do just what the editor pointed out as its main aim: it, indeed, opens up doors through which, hopefully, many other future researchers will wish to pass (4).

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Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race.
Noémie Ndiaye.

RaceB4Race: Critical Race Studies of the Premodern. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 613 pp. \$64.95.

Working transnationally and across disciplines, this book makes a compelling argument for how foundationally theater participated in early modern racecraft. Its chapters discuss three types of performed blackness: visual black-up, acoustic blackspeak, and kinetic black dance. Such performances repeatedly activated the titular "scripts of blackness" that served Spanish, French, and English ideological needs as those societies contended with their colonialist ambitions, color-based slavery, and the presence of non-white Afro-diasporic peoples in the body politic and social realm. Theatrical practices operated materially and rhetorically to shape cultural perceptions of Afro-diasporic peoples.

The first two chapters on black-up identify scripts that hum throughout subsequent chapters: the diabolical script inherited from medieval stage devils, and the commodity