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Review of *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* by Lorna Hutson

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The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England. Lorna Hutson. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Hutson's study of the impact of humanism on male friendship and the anxieties in the changing nature of friendship expressed in literature and Shakespearean drama is brilliant and thought provoking, a work that stands at the intersection of economic, cultural, and literary history. Hutson's writing style is dense and rather difficult, and her thesis will certainly provoke debate, especially as she takes on feminist and new historicist critics. Hutson's title is provocative, and a reader would probably pick up her study thinking it was about Jessica, the most famous usurer's daughter, and *The Merchant of Venice.* Though one would have indeed felt that *Merchant* would have been the ideal play for Hutson to analyze in her discussion of economics or on male friendship and the anxiety it provokes, she saves that play for her conclusion. The conclusion, in fact, is the strongest chapter of the book, and one comes away wishing she had focused more of her attention there. But Hutson is using the metaphor of

the usurer's daughter not to discuss Jews in Renaissance England, but rather the part all women played as objects of exchange for men making a bid for success in the Renaissance.

Hutson also looked extensively at humanist readings that were central to Renaissance thought, such as the classical texts of Xenophon, Terence, and Cicero. Using these wide-ranging readings, Hutson points out that Shakespearean tragedy is filled with examples of real or, more often, supposed sexual transgressions of women and the anxiety these beliefs about female behavior cause the male characters. Hutson argues that rather than see this theme as expressive of any eternal truth about men's imaginings about women's sexuality, one should see it as significant of a historically specific time of transition in socioeconomic male relations. This feeling of crisis that was expressed in both Renaissance fiction and Shakespearean drama was in truth, suggests Hutson, not concerned with love between men and women, but with women as signs of love and friendship extended between men. Renaissance humanism had transformed traditional modes of male friendship, and this new friendship had elements of economic dependency as well as affective bonds. Hutson's theme is that English humanism stressed the practical efficacy of persuasive rhetoric, and this undermined traditional modes of friendship and exchange. Hutson's work, which is expressing Renaissance friendship as an economic as well as emotional dependency, ties together the themes of rhetoric, economics, and the representation of women in the sixteenth century. To examine these themes, much of the focus of Hutson's book centers on *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, and her readings of these plays in terms of male power and agency is well worth considering. She acknowledges how her work recalls the scholarship of Patricia Parker, especially *Literary Fat Ladies*. Though surprisingly she does not mention the work, Hutson also borrows thematically from Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament*.

In the last few decades, many cultural historians and literary scholars have focused on the characterizations of strong women in Renaissance literature and drama, especially Shakespeare. Hutson disagrees with new historicist and feminist scholars who see this as an example of female agency and representation of actual strong women. Though Hutson's own thesis is intriguing, I think she seriously underestimates the significance of these other scholarly perspectives. While Shakespeare certainly was aware of humanist texts and obscure Renaissance prose fiction, he was also writing for a public theatre; hence the breadth of his audience and the impact of powerful women such as Elizabeth I herself is critical. Whether one agrees with Hutson or not, it is obvious that she has produced a major work of impressive scholarship that many people will find of value.

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