Renaissance and Reformation
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Beecher, Donald. Adapted Brains and Imaginary Worlds: Cognitive Science and the Literature of the Renaissance

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Enfin, les trois premiers volumes de ce *Dictionnaire poétique* rappellent le volume impressionnant des vers pamphlétaires ou partisans produits dans la seconde partie du siècle : c'est bien l'imbrication passionnante des poètes français dans les combats de leur temps qui est retracée dans ces différentes notices. Extrêmement bien documenté et agréablement écrit, ce *Dictionnaire des poètes français de la seconde moitié du XVIᵉ siècle* est bien un outil de recherche essentiel pour qui s'intéresse à la poésie française de la Renaissance.

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The potential benefits of applying cognitive science to an understanding of the arts are twofold: one may gain an understanding of the workings of human cognition that illuminates artistic processes and content; from this understanding may come suggestions for prescriptive and proscriptive approaches that increase the likelihood of artistic success. The pitfalls are also twofold: the first, arising from the second noted benefit, is the imposition of rigid notions that hinder creative freedom and lead to a narrow recognition of artistic success, notions, moreover, that are dictated to the arts from the outside; the second, arising from a lack of real cross-disciplinary expertise, is a situation in which accounts of findings in cognitive science and their applicability to artistic activity are presented by those who don't really have the understanding or judgment to back up their claims to an audience not in a position to evaluate them.

Work on cognitive science and the arts has been flourishing for some years now. I am most familiar with it in the area of theatre studies. Donald Beecher's *Adapted Brains and Imaginary Worlds* brings cognitive science and its "hermeneutic usefulness" (45) to the understanding of some literary works of the Renaissance, mostly English. Beecher's book, I argue, offers the benefits and pitfalls listed above.

Beecher's is a rather lengthy and wide-ranging book, ambitious and demanding. Among the many literary works it analyzes insightfully are *Doctor Faustus, Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well, The Fairie Queene*, and Petrarch's *Familiar Letters*, as well as works by Thomas North, Robert Greene, John Marston, Anton Francesco Doni, and Heliodorus of Emesa. It is unlikely to find a reader to whom its many foci speak equally or who is willing to plough through all of it with equal fervour, especially when the talk turns (I betray my ignorance and limitations here) to "hormones and peptides such as oxytocin and arginine vasopressin" or "the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the […] ventromedial prefrontal cortex" (82–83). It is best approached, I believe, like a smorgasbord. Let each reader follow his or her own interests.

As a way of tightening and focusing my analysis, I concentrate here on Beecher's reading of the work I am most familiar with: Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure,* the subject of his second chapter. Beecher begins by presenting a set of findings in cognitive science, in this instance what he calls the biogenesis of ethics. To oversimplify, human evolution has developed in us a tendency to make snap judgments in our encounters with other moral actors. There has been a need to determine quickly and unthinkingly whether someone is friend or foe. This snap determination is made for the sake of basic safety and security. Human ethical understanding is binary and non-reflective. It eschews uncertainty, ambivalence, and thoughtful, open-ended consideration. When such a being reads a work of literature it looks toward "the stasis which justice and consensus alone can provide, and on which all readers can agree" (80–81) One wonders, in passing, what becomes of the idea of a problem play and critical disagreement. In Beecher's reading, the Duke is an ethical force aligned with the basic patterns and needs of our brains, and at the end of the play he enacts our innate values: "we may understand Vincentio's choices in relation to priorities associated with human nature itself" (109). No "duke of dark corners" for Beecher.

What can we say about such a reading? It will be bracing for those who are part of a critical tradition that has come to distrust the Duke and his motives, reminding us that the notion of a problem play is hollowed out and one sided if there is nothing to say in defense of the Duke. On the other hand, Beecher's reading returns us, in broad terms, to a reading of Shakespeare in which fathers and rulers know best and the order of things is not to be questioned. Like many readings that arise from the application of cognitive science, Beecher's has a

profoundly traditionalist aspect. The emphasis on clear binaries, certainty, and innate and non-reflective understanding, and the assumption of conclusions on which all readers can agree, are also somewhat traditionalist impositions which, as prescriptions or proscriptions, shut down the possibility of open, multi-positional intellectual exploration. No need exists to question the Duke or the play further.

Finally, I wonder if it's true that we are innately the ethical beings Beecher suggests. I don't have the expertise to judge the science Beecher relates or the accuracy of his accounts. Most importantly, I cannot affirm or deny the conclusions he draws from this material as regards *Measure for Measure*. It seems to me, however, that his basic tenet is that there is no point in going against human nature, and he assumes that Shakespeare certainly was not fool enough to do so. I'm not sure this is the only way to think. It is equally possible to see Shakespeare as bringing a skeptical eye to our natural biases and prejudices: Are we always at their mercy? Don't doubt and reflection and oppositional thinking have a role to play? Is the role of art always merely to give the audience what our synapses think they need or is it to take us out of our intellectual and cognitive comfort zones? Down such a path may be folly, failure, and penury. But just because evolution has hard-wired us to gorge on fatty food whenever the opportunity presents itself doesn't mean all-you-can-eat greasy spoons are the only kind of restaurant that can make a buck.

Any review, especially a polemical one, is bound to misrepresent. Beecher's book is much more complex and nuanced than my presentation so far suggests, and the kinds of objections I make are somewhat dealt with, especially in the introduction. Nevertheless, I find *Adapted Brains and Imaginary Worlds*, like many other studies in cognitive science and the arts, unsettlingly normative in its implications.

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