



# Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition

*Richard Keller Simon*

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*Seinfeld* as a contemporary adaptation of Etherege's Restoration comedy of manners *The Man of Mode*?

*Friends* as a reworking of Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*?

*Star Wars* as an adaptation of Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*?

The popular culture that surrounds us in our daily lives bears a striking similarity to some of the great works of literature of the past. In television, movies, magazines, and advertisements we are exposed to many of the same stories as those critics who study the great books of Western literature, but we have simply been encouraged to look at those stories differently.

In *Trash Culture*, Richard K. Simon examines the ways in which the great literature and cultural work of the past has been rewritten for today's consumer society, with supermarket tabloids such as *The National Enquirer* and celebrity gossip magazines like *People* serving as contemporary versions of the great dramatic tragedies of the past. Today's advertising repeats the tale of the Golden Age, but inverts the value system of a classic utopia; the shopping mall combines bits and pieces of the great garden styles of Western history, and now adds consumer goods; *Playboy* magazine revises Castiglione's Renaissance courtesy book, *The Book of the Courtier*; and *Cosmopolitan* magazine revises the women's coming-of-age novels of Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Edith Wharton.

*Trash Culture* concludes that the great books are alive and well, but simply hidden from the critics. It argues for the linking of high and low for the study and appreciation of each form of literature, and the importance of teaching popular culture alongside books of the great tradition in order to understand the critical context in which the books appear.

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