
Arthur F. Kinney, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500-1600*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Pp. xxiv, 339. \$59.95; \$19.95 pb.

This newly-commissioned collection of essays on early modern literature and culture is pitched to the undergraduate level. All the essays deploy the methodology or reading practice of the new historicism. Some of the essays are more thoroughly grounded in this method than others but this collection proves that the new historicism, which saw a birth in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), is now moving into the mainstream.

The contributors run through a dazzling display of the early modern critical questions of the last fifty years. Catherine Bates locates the early modern predilection for gold imagery in specific historical conditions of patronage (96-97). Suzanne Gossett breezily lays to rest the vexed question of gender, class, and subjectivity on the stage, with its constellation issues of interiority, cross-dressing and homoerotic spectacle, in a few words: "gender and rank limit the style and degree of subjectivity permitted" (157). In a paragraph on the same page, Gossett tosses off the definitive meanings of the dramatic multiple plot, bilocality (a favorite puzzler for Shakespeareans) and the inset play. Raymond Waddington sees fit to define the self: it is "an essential identity that is complemented by the cultural construct" (287). Statements like Waddington's may raise more questions than they answer.

All this confidence is meant to convey a reassuringly firm tone to students by laying out simple definitions and summaries, even at the risk of stating the obvious. John N. King, for example, in graceful prose offers simple explanations of the harder words, like recusancy (124) and fourteeners (129), and of concepts, like prophesying (127). Donald Cheney explains euphuism and gives an example (209). Very handy are the short historical summaries, like King's history of religious reformation in a sentence (108), or Leah S. Marcus's history of the permanent London theatres in a paragraph (133). King, especially, understands the theatrical importance of blazonry—William Cecil is introduced as "the Queen's chief minister" (125). Greenblatt's shifting circularity seems far behind us: we feel, or we want students to feel, *oriented* now.

In this new historicist anthology some incorrect sentiments are allowed to surface. For instance, although Gossett admits interiority is one of the smaller potatoes Shakespeare is boiling, she still insists *Julius Caesar* is about "personal psychology" (172). Heather Dubrow knows that "conceptions of

the autonomous individual” can be seen as “tainted products of humanist ideology” (179-80); nevertheless, it is fairly evident in her argument that she would like to reinstate the western individual in his customary control-freak subject position. But for the most part the essayists present a united new historicist front.

The order of essays in this anthology is determined by didactic and ideological considerations. The first essay, Colin Burrows’ “The sixteenth century,” gives a general historical and literary account of the century. The essays that follow increasingly adopt a new historicist position, with the more esoteric, or what I call new-historicist-with-a-twist essays, coming last. Thus chapters three through eleven represent a compendium of ways to affirm literary and cultural reciprocity. King states that his chapter “considers the interplay among literary and nonliterary texts within their historical, political, and cultural contexts” (137). “Cultural discourses [...] circulated through these plays,” Gossett remarks of early modern drama (159). Dubrow says the lyric can be read “as both source and symptom of its culture’s suppression of women” (180). By chapter twelve the point presumably has been established and scholars begin to substitute other concepts, but still according to a reciprocity paradigm. Lena Cowen Orlen states that early moderns’ diaries “reveal their struggle to shape their lives in accord with the tenor of their times” (242). Garrett Sullivan and Linda Woodbridge insist on the same paradigm: “While [William] Webbe sees himself as identifying a native poetic tradition, we suggest that he is helping to construct it” (266). Thus advising students to read the essays in order is a sound pedagogical approach.

There are plugs for other methods and concepts associated with the new historicism. Arthur F. Kinney begins the introduction with thick descriptions of a painting. Lisa Jardine’s method is successful, Kinney says, because she is “[A]rmed with historic specificity” (4). Clark Hulse warns students to beware critical imposition of value in discourses on arts, “including the one you are now reading” (36). Throughout the collection, scholars insist on the need for a closely historical approach and reject grand and meliorist narratives.

Despite some emphasis on new world activity, racialization is not discussed in this collection. Similarly, contributors scrupulously avoid the forbidden noun “homosexual” although “homoerotic” appears twice or thrice and Orlin does the next best thing by referring to period “heterosexual alliances” (242). On the other hand, Sullivan and Woodbridge’s “Popular culture in print” is a devastatingly effective treatment of class, arguing that the lower orders and their characteristic activities are a construction or invention meant to define by contrast a constructed, invented elite.

I would recommend this anthology to early modern students, as it could offer them both a critical method and informative resources. This is not an imaginative collection of essays; it is a careful one, unlikely to frighten. Since some of the texts discussed in the anthology are “early” and unemphasized at the undergraduate level, some directed period reading may be necessary before students are able to approach the essays.

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Elaine Feinstein

Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet

Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001

(also published in the US by W.W. Norton & Company, 2001)

273 pp. \$29.95.

Ted Hughes has been well served by his major critics and interpreters: his poetry well-glossed, his preoccupations, themes, and governing myths understood. Elaine Feinstein attempts to raise the stakes in this first biography of the poet, which she announces as both a study of the life and a work of literary criticism. She is not always successful. Feinstein is a respected poet, novelist, and biographer who knew Hughes, and has managed to create a relatively sympathetic, although highly fragmented portrait of the man who was devoted to his family, committed to poetry, generous to friends and other writers, and persistent in his efforts to ensure that the writing of his first wife, Sylvia Plath, was published appropriately.

Yet literary biography is tricky business. An extensive understanding of the subject *and* his work, the ability to convey his or her specific vision, guiding themes or conflicts, and a strong narrative sense are called for. There is little question that Feinstein has done her homework, talked to many although certainly not all of Hughes’s network of friends, and had the advantage of access to the large trove of Hughes’s manuscripts and letters at Emory University, which have been opened to scholars within the last couple of years. Feinstein’s cautious tone throughout the biography, possibly out of respect for Hughes’s immediate family who did not cooperate with the study, works against her, however, and opportunities for interpretation are either circumvented or never addressed.