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Review by Sean McDowell

Cheney, Patrick, Andrew Hadfield and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., eds. *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*. New York et al: Oxford UP, 2006. 368 pages.

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Back when the current battalions of associate and full professors were undergraduates, the lecture was not yet a lost art. When faculty needed to contextualize the use of blank verse in Elizabethan drama or the popularity of the sonnet in the 1590s or why John Donne used the structure of a Catholic process-canonization-to write of the love of a (presumably) Protestant couple, they lectured on these topics as a prelude to literary analysis. Many of them did their best to grab and hold auditor interest; not every lecturer sounded like the parents in *Peanuts*, in spite of the received views of many a twenty-first century pedagogy seminar. Throughout the academy today, however, the dominant pedagogical paradigm has shifted toward discussion-based models (the fishbowl, small groups, etc.) as the preferred classroom strategy, especially among younger faculty. As a result, what was once the content of the lecture also has had to shift to other places (supplemental reading, websites, videos) where it can be encountered outside of class time.

Enter the critical “companion” volume, the volume of essays by diverse hands intended to supply the background or contextual information once communicated during lectures but now outsourced to “free up” class time for discussion. During the past fifteen years especially, literary studies has been drenched in companions of various kinds, many of them published by Oxford and Cambridge University Presses. Indeed, these two English publishers appear to be in a companion race, as each tries to outdo the other, often, ironically enough, relying on the same contributors writing different essays on some of the same topics. The latest installment from Oxford, *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, offers a thorough education in its subject by gathering twenty-eight original essays by scholars who mostly are leading experts in their respective areas. The volume covers a

span that begins with the “invention” of English verse in the form of Tottel’s *Miscellany* to Milton’s and Marvell’s lyrics, and within this span, essays consider a variety of topics, ranging from thematic discussions (e.g., “Tudor and Stuart Defenses of Poetry”), to specific genres within an author’s *oeuvre* (e.g., four essays on Spenser, three on Shakespeare, and three on Donne), to overviews of groups of poets (e.g., “Wyatt, Surrey, and the Henrician Court,” “Earlier Courtier Verse: Oxford, Dyer, and Gascoigne,” and “Cavalier Poetry and Civil War”). Moreover, each essay includes a supplemental reading list of the major books and articles most relevant for the continued study of the subject in question.

The true test of a companion volume cannot be strictly its range, however, but also the success with which it meets the demands of its assumed audiences -- audiences in the plural -- because as part of the escalation in the companions race, these volumes now promise “groundbreaking scholarship” in addition to the critical commonplaces that once filled lectures. As a result, the presumed audiences for companions have multiplied and diversified. Imagine a classroom filled not just with young men and women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, but also with graduate students, fellow professors who must bone up on a subject for a teaching assignment, retirees living the dream of continuing education, and even the average working person who loves reading as much, or more than TV (if such people exist anymore in the U. S.) and who wishes to learn more. The successful essay in these collections engages and rewards each of these audiences. It instructs and delights each one.

The ensuing rhetorical challenges are not easy. More often than not, when an essay misfires, the problem can be tied directly to a narrowing of a sense of audience. For example, in “Literary Criticism, Literary History, and the Place of Homoeroticism,” Jonathan Goldberg’s examination of the critical tendency to pair male writers as a way of constructing literary history--without attending fully to the gender implications of such pairings--usefully analyzes the introductions of the 2000 edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* as its primary test case. While this focus seems ideal for undergraduates, though, Goldberg also assumes his readers are familiar, at least in general terms, with the knotty arguments of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Joel Fineman,

Jonathan Crewe, and others, thereby speaking above the heads of newcomers to Renaissance poetry.

In a different fashion, though with a similar effect, Arthur F. Marotti's "Print, Manuscripts, and Miscellanies" ends up being more useful as background for graduate students looking toward their qualifying examinations than as a way into the subject for undergraduates. Few people would be more qualified to introduce the relationships between and assumptions behind coterie manuscript transmission and print publication than Marotti, whose *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (1986) has been described as one of the most significant publications in Donne studies in the past twenty-five years and whose *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (1995) appears on three of the recommended reading lists in the present edition. Yet Marotti chooses mainly to present a catalog of verse miscellanies between 1557 and 1665, with overviews of the content of each collection, rather than dive into the tastiest meat of his subject. While this information is important-indeed, crucial for graduate students specializing in non-dramatic literature-the presentation is not sufficiently engaging for undergraduates, nor does it convey the intriguing dimensions of coterie circulation or writers' attitudes toward, and treatment of print.

By contrast, the essay by Steven May on "Elizabethan Courtier Verse" both covers what it needs to for newcomers and more experienced readers alike *and* attempts to grab all readers from the first sentence onward: "What role did poetry play in the scramble for recognition and royal patronage at the Elizabethan Court?" The essay productively explores this question and the two others that follow it by reading the literary careers of Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford, Sir Edward Dyer, and George Gascoigne as illustrative of how insider courtiers (De Vere and Dyer) found success in using verse to obtain honors and material rewards, while outsider, would-be courtiers (Gascoigne) were doomed from the start. May's account stimulates enough curiosity for readers to want to learn more.

As the above comparison suggests, the best essays in *Early Modern Poetry: A Critical Companion* resolve the audience conundrum by posing an engaging, basic yet original question (or a series of questions) that allows for the smooth incorporation of contextual information while simultaneously leading more

experienced readers into new territory. They do make original contentions within current critical conversations while supplying facts necessary for one to appreciate their originality. Especially noteworthy--and therefore useful to stimulate class discussions--are the essays by Susanne Woods on the regularization of the accentual-syllabic meter in English, William A. Oram on the career of Raleigh and the composition of the English court, Alan Sinfield on Marlowe's erotic verse, William J. Kennedy on Sidney's interaction with Petrarchism, Patrick Cheney on the role of Shakespeare's narrative poems within his literary career, Achsah Guibbory on the "trauma of grace" in Donne's religious verse, Helen Wilcox on the historical significance of Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Michael Schoenfeldt on why Herbert's courtly career ambitions shifted into his religious calling, and Thomas Healy on Marvell's "ambivalence toward pastoral" (304). Each essay meets its prescribed information burden in an interesting way; each would appeal to multiple audiences; and each foregrounds an intriguing critical point or cluster of critical points.

The good news for instructors looking for supplemental aid (and one suspects, for Oxford University Press) is that the excellent essays in *Early Modern Poetry: A Critical Companion* outnumber those that misfire from the perspective of audience. The editors have chosen their contributors well, for the most part. In fact, there are enough worthwhile contributions to warrant the volume's possible adoption in multiple-author courses on Renaissance poetry, especially for those of us unwilling or unable to deliver the necessary background information ourselves.

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