

The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture.

Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Ben Burton, eds.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxvii + 228 pp. \$81.

The eleven original essays in this edited collection, written by specialists for advanced readers, focus on early modern English poetry and poetics, including the works of Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney Herbert, and Shakespeare. The collection will not fail to please and inspire readers interested in the intersection of historicism and formalism. Each essay queries the aesthetics of verse (such as meter, punctuation, and other subtle details) as well as the verse's political, social, and religious contexts. To unpack the mysteries of Renaissance poetry, the authors immerse themselves in the cultures of their subjects. The internal stuff of the poem is anatomized along with the personal or political conditions behind the early modern author's artistic process. To quote Nigel Smith in his foreword, the essays present a "challenge . . . for readability" (xiv)—be prepared to Google technical terminology or historical minutiae, as I did—but they also push us to be more nuanced, more attentive, and more refined readers. The editors' introductory essay is substantial and comprehensive. It discusses the development of New Criticism, New Historicism, and New Formalism (and its subfields) and explores the wide-ranging responses to form in the Renaissance, from George Puttenham's confident and "untroubled" poetics to Donne, Sidney, and Mary Sidney Herbert's "anxious" reflections on formal experimentation during a time when "Calvinist culture . . . was suspicious of pleasure in worship" (13–14).

The essays that follow are not divided into subgroups; readers must use their own discretion to discover thematic connections. In the first essay, Heather Dubrow investigates the concept of gathering and separation in the lyric poetry of Spenser and Donne. The "accordion-like effect of gathering" is more than an aesthetic quirk; it is the embodiment of real political groupings and dissolutions in England and Ireland (36). Next, Joshua Scodel examines Ben Jonson's use of the Latin elegiac couplet in *Epigrams* and *The Forest*. Outdoing his Roman model, Jonson employs the elegiac form for a variety of effects, including a celebration of civic virtue and religious devotion. Ben Burton's essay situates the psychodrama of Shakespeare's Sonnets 85, 108, and 125 in the context of debates surrounding religious performance, particularly Reformists' concerns with the ability of "ceremonial words and actions" to bear "witness" to inward states (58). Richard

Strier considers the relationship between form and “psychological bondage” through a reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 and Herbert’s “The Collar” (73). How does stanzaic form “capture [Shakespeare’s] subjects’ thinking” and produce “patterns of thinking in the reader” (102)? These questions animate Raphael Lyne’s analysis of the parallel structure in the sixain stanza of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and the rhyme royal of *Lucrece*.

The next cluster of essays focuses on women writers, song, spiritual devotion, and performance. Katherine R. Larson looks at the anonymous musical settings of Mary Sidney Herbert’s Psalm translations (high-quality images of the score for Psalms 51 and 130 are provided). Paying close attention to the intermingling of the “somatic, sonic, and musical,” Larson illustrates the experiences of (noble) women engaged in private religious devotion (122). Mary Sidney Herbert’s Psalms also fascinate Gavin Alexander, who discusses the practice of “sacred parody”—that is, the “emptying a form of its secular content and converting it to sacred use”—as seen in the ghosting of Philip Sidney’s lyric by his sister’s Psalms or John Dowland’s complaints by George Herbert’s “Affliction” (138). Danielle Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan examine the experimental practices of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women. “Quite readily and frequently,” women in the period “hybridize existing forms to new ends,” which reveals their engagement with criticism (154). Alice Eardley explores Lucy Hutchinson’s “pointing,” or punctuation (or lack thereof), and the challenges seventeenth-century “punctuation poems” pose for textual scholars (177). The final essay, by J. Paul Hunter, analyzes poetic structures (such as the couplet) and page formatting to evoke the “full, actual” sound of poems as they might have been heard by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century audiences (180).

It is worth noting Angela Leighton’s reflection (in “Afterwords”) that “what perhaps seems missing from these essays is that larger philosophical anxiety about form. . . . On the whole, these essays do not question the validity of form, or of formal readings” (202). This is a valid point and I wish the editors had taken the opportunity to craft a response. Instead, the essays closely read familiar and obscure poems with one eye toward their formal expression and another toward their historical context. Today’s formalism comfortably sits at the table alongside historical methods. Perhaps this is what it means to do “new” formalism.

Penelope Geng, *Macalester College*