

Andrew Mattison. *The Unimagined in the English Renaissance: Poetry and the Limits of Mimesis*.

Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013. vii + 174 pp. \$65. ISBN: 978-1-61147-597-5.

In a closely argued study of the limits of mimesis in Renaissance poetic theory and practice, Andrew Mattison challenges some of the dominant trends in early modern studies today. Describing the stance that emerges from his study as a species of “countermaterialism” (14), he diverges from the materialist cultural history that has had a palpable influence on the broader field of literary studies and the early modern period in particular. Early modern visual and material culture becomes invisible, so to speak, in this study that explores the limits of imagistic representation in British poetry of the Renaissance. His book swerves equally from a New Critical formalism that regards poetry as well-wrought urns, arguing instead “that ambitious lyric requires not stable and vivid images but obscure and mutable ones, whose flexibility of realization is essential to their ambition” (82).

The author explores the discrepancies not only between recent literary theory and the aims of Renaissance poetry, but also between Renaissance poetic theory and practice. Although Simonides’s characterization of a poem as speaking picture and Horace’s famous formulation in *Ars Poetica*, “Ut pictura poesis,” dominated aesthetic speculation in the Renaissance, Mattison challenges the accepted view that theories of verbal pictorialism controlled poetic practice during the same period. For Mattison, it is skepticism toward imagistic representation that defines the major poetic achievements of the period.

Sir Philip Sidney, though not a subject of extended scrutiny in these pages, emerges as “a nuanced thinker about mimesis in theory and practice,” one whose concerns are later taken up by Spenser, Donne, and Milton (10), culminating in the “anti-image poetics” of Milton (22). Genre figures prominently in Mattison’s study, and lyric poetry occupies a place that may be described as both privileged and marginalized. Citing the work of Brazilian theorist Luiz Costa Lima, Mattison builds a strong case for viewing Renaissance poetry as “dangerous (in a way that theory seeks to contain)” (7): that is, as a kind of Renaissance countercultural force for withholding images and challenging dominant theories of representation.

Following a theoretical introduction, Mattison devotes chapters to exploring the anti-imagist poetics of Spenser’s early poetry, particularly *The Shepheardes Calender* and “Colin Clouts Come Home Againe,” *The Fairie Queene*, the lyrics of John Donne, Milton’s *Paradise Regained*, and his last sonnet, “Methought I saw.”

Each of these chapters gives the impression of a keen critical mind actively engaged with the textual tensions and disruptions in poetic explorations of the distinction between “the visible and invisible, imagined and unimagined” (157).

Shakespeare and Renaissance drama remain conspicuously absent from Mattison’s study for reasons that he explains in his introduction. According to Mattison, Shakespeare was supremely confident in “the representative capacities of drama and its ability to connect a playwright’s imagination with that of an audience member in a kind of grand collaboration” (6). The major poets of the period whom Mattison discusses do not share that confidence, but their explorations in verse of the limits of mimesis have been eclipsed, according to the author, by the centrality accorded the drama of the period. Speculating that the increasing “emphasis on drama” by the profession is linked to the growing importance of social history to understanding the past (“drama’s clearer representations of the daily world seem more compelling and more urgent,” 155), Mattison mounts what he characterizes as a “defense of poetry” for its preservation of “precisely those ideas that are not immediately suited to the immediacy of representation the stage affords” (155).

One might wish that, in a study of the ways in which Renaissance poetry explored and elevated what Mattison terms the “unimagined” and unrepresentable, the Reformation and its frequently violent iconoclasm would have figured as key players. If I am not mistaken, the words “Reformation” and “iconoclasm” never appear in the course of the study. But to register such a complaint strikes me as unfairly wishing for a different kind of book. Mattison clearly wants to do something different than read poetry through the lens of social history. The book that Mattison has written deserves a wide audience and as close and considerate attention as he bestows on the poets he so admirably and admiringly explores.

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