

Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton, eds. *Rethinking Historicism from Shakespeare to Milton*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiii + 306 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-107-02751-0.

This stimulating collection reassesses historicist approaches to Renaissance literature in the wake of New Historicism and in response to challenges from presentist, formalist, and disciplinary quarters. According to editors Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton, current literary historicists “talk much less about methodology” (6) than early practitioners of New Historicism; thus one admirable goal of their collection is to generate provocative reflection about what historicism can continue to contribute to the analysis of early modern literary texts. The editors divide the essays into four categories: theology, drama (centered on Shakespeare), Milton, and gender studies. This range of topics provides a useful overview of the wide impact of historicism, but it also prevents a more focused exploration of the particular methodological, archival, and interpretive challenges that face historicist scholars in distinct fields. A historicist analysis of Shakespearean drama might need to address quite different cultural contexts — the economics of theater, the collaborative production of plays, the politics of audience response — than a historicist analysis of the writings of Margaret Cavendish. Although the collection’s broad approach limits the depth of its critical interventions, the essays generally provide compelling readings of individual texts as well as incisive commentary on the possibilities and limitations of historicist criticism.

Featuring essays by Andrew Hadfield, Michael McKeon, and Marshall Grossman, the first section of the book offers a sustained introduction to the theory and practice of historicism. Addressing some recent charges against historicism — that it reduces literary texts to contexts, ignores the aesthetic, and fetishizes minutiae — Hadfield advocates renewed attention to the importance of form and to the problem of the value of literature. McKeon defines the essence of historical method as a “strategic dialectic between the division and conflation of categories” (49), such as particular and general or parts and whole. Insisting that literary texts are emotionally compelling works of art, not documents, Grossman argues for an “ethics of reading” (66) that elucidates how a work from the past can continue to move present-day readers.

In a section on “Historicism and Theology,” Thomas Fulton provides a meticulous analysis of sixteenth-century theological and political prose by Valla, Colet, Erasmus, and More; and Heather Hirschfield offers a philological

analysis of the theological implications of the term *satisfaction* in *Othello*. I found this the least successful unit in the collection, in part because both authors' detailed textual analyses leave little room for methodological reflection, and in part because the two essays are so different in subject, method, and chronological scope that they prevent the drawing of larger conclusions about the state of historicist scholarship on early modern religion.

Paul Stevens's essay in the section "Dramatic Histories" offers a bracing critique of presentism before arguing that historicists can capture the alterity of the past by examining how writers responded to each other, as Shakespeare in *The Tempest* responds to the problem of grace in *Eastward Ho*. Lawrence Manley demonstrates how knowledge of theatrical patronage relations might inform the interpretation of dramatic texts, but his thick compiling of genealogical allusions risks enacting what Hadfield calls the "grind of historicism" (31).

Sharon Achinstein's essay for the section "Milton and the Problems of History" does not really address the "problems of history" (or historicism) as much as demonstrate, quite compellingly, how Milton's figural allusions to classical tragedy support his ethical arguments for divorce. Martin Dzelzainis explores how New Historicism was shaped by Stephen Greenblatt's failure to heed Foucault's insistence that "it is not only possible but necessary to tell the truth to power" (218); he goes on to examine the importance of truth telling in Milton's life and writings.

In the section "Gendering Historicism," Laura Lunger Knoppers uses the figure of the female warrior in seventeenth-century texts to elucidate a primary technique of historicist method: defining the relationship between a text and its historical contexts. Also addressing the impact of war on women writers, Erin Murphy "estrang[e]s the present" (259) by considering how Virginia Woolf and Catherine Gallagher (in her reflections on the Vietnam War-era women's liberation movement) engage with the Civil War writings of Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish.

In a brief afterword, Nigel Smith advocates vibrant, artful scholarly writing as a value on which historicists, presentists, and formalists might all agree.

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