

Shirley Sharon-Zisser, ed. *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's A Lover's Complaint: Suffering Ecstasy*.

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The short narrative poem *A Lover's Complaint* is an enigma: it first appeared at the end of Thorpe's first edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in 1609 and then was

not printed again until Benson's edition of 1640; its author and date of composition are still under debate; and it is not clear that the poem is complete in its present form.

The first part of *Critical Essays* is a competent and useful survey of the critical history of the poem as background material for the essays presented in this volume. It supplements and brings up to date the critical past as recounted by Hyder Rollins in the *New Variorum* (1938), but does not relay Rollins's considerable doubt about Shakespeare's authorship, based on the writings of several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics. Some of this doubt is recognized, however, in the views of Brian Vickers (currently in a minority), but the essayists in this volume generally accept Shakespeare's authorship, in keeping with the conclusions of Katherine Duncan-Jones and other recent editors.

In regard to the form of *A Lover's Complaint*, the poem is puzzling in that it seems to end abruptly after a short 329 lines written in rhyme royal, with a final exclamatory, apparently ambiguous stanza spoken by the female complainant. The narrator's voice has not returned to give closure to the poem. While placement of a complaint narrative was not unusual at the end of a sonnet sequence, the abrupt ending and the absent narrator provide rich fodder for postmodern critics who thrive on the instabilities of language and form.

The editor and a colleague, Stephen Whitworth, both psychorhetoricians, write a critical history survey that includes abstracts of the subsequent articles presented in this volume, which demonstrate "the variety and high quality of work finally being done on . . . the most neglected portion of Shakespeare's poetic artistry" (48), showing the value of "interpretive instability" (49) in the critical life of *A Lover's Complaint*. A series of nine chapters follows, ending (culminating?) with the psychorhetorical criticism by these same two scholars. Both of their essays focus on the melancholic masochism of the female complainant, and shuttling between Freud and Lacan, they explore the psycholinguistic structures of the poem which give rise to the "suffering ecstasy," or *jouissance*, expressed in the orificial body language of the poem's rhetorical structures, particularly the orgasmic Os of the final stanza.

The earlier seven chapters (one reprinted from a previously published work) offer a refreshing range of views based on contemporaneous stances of Virgilian-Ovidian authors (Cheney), use of early modern religious and nonreligious confessional practices (Stegner and Bell), intertextual referencing with other works by Shakespeare (Roe and Dubrow), and psychological analysis of seduction (Schiffer). They are generally well-written but sometimes unnecessarily turgid in style. The collection as a whole is self-referentially intertextual (probably the result of conferencing of authors), and there is considerable homage paid to most recent editors, such as Duncan-Jones, Kerrigan, Burrow, and Roe. More attention could have been paid to comparing *A Lover's Complaint* with the other narrative poems, and it seems to me that there are some profound critical dangers in using an early modern text to explore postmodern psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, this volume is

useful as a reference tool and commendable for encouraging further critical investigations of the intriguing text of *A Lover's Complaint*.

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