

Roland Greene. *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes*.

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This elegant and compelling study of five keywords in Renaissance thought is a timely intervention in the ongoing critical conversation currently revisiting the questions beloved of New Critics with the benefit of the best parts of historicism and informed by the theoretical sophistication of poststructuralism. Namely how, what, and why do words signify in the literatures of the past? While Greene's work may initially seem heavily indebted to the keywords approach of Raymond Williams and his followers, in fact he immediately broadens (and narrows) our sense of what a word might be, moving beyond the literal to conceptual terrain upon which words become both "complex semantic events" and "equipment for living" (6). He emphasizes "stories of words in revision," drawing upon an impressive variety of disciplines and literatures in order to amplify his "sense of words and concepts as holding in themselves the negotiations and contradictions that others find in received doctrines, intellectual trajectories, and cultural appropriations" (12).

Such a potentially all-encompassing subject requires Greene to practice considerable restraint, and the structural device of devoting a chapter to each of a series of five single words is highly effective. He emphasizes the arbitrariness of his choices, and is also quick to own that other words may equally have done; indeed, I would have been especially intrigued to read his mooted chapter on *experience*, given the heavy emphasis given to the term throughout his argument. Where Greene's work is most illuminating, perhaps, is in recognizing that not all words are created equal in this (or any other) period, and that each of the terms scrutinized here requires a different interpretative framework, or rather has been chosen to exemplify a particular way of thinking about language as it works in and through the Renaissance. *Invention* is a kind of "semantic palimpsest," constantly reinscribed with new and evolving senses while continuing to bear the traces of its own past. *Language* is a "pendent" word, one that is suspended in the minds of reader — and writer — alongside its inevitable partners, defining itself in relation to these shadowy semantic others (*tongue, speech, discourse*). *Resistance* is a provisional kind of word, a "cartoon" or "sketch" of an idea that has not yet reached fruition but for which early modern society requires a placeholder in order to debate the term itself into its proper existence (for language is made by and through language, Greene makes clear). *Blood* is a "conceptual envelope," its outer limits tested as human and literary experience collide with what Greene conceives as the largely symbolic world of premodern language. And *world* itself, Greene's final word, contains multitudes, displaying behaviors characteristic of each of these other types, but combining them to an even more dynamic and powerful effect; it is an "engine," driving change across other words and concepts, across disciplines and contexts, and is itself refigured in the process.

Greene terms his book an "experiment" (another word much attended to by recent critics), framing it as an exercise in telling different kinds of stories about words and their usage in Renaissance literature. This spirit of play (befitting Greene's conception of the provisionality of words themselves in the period) affords the book a wonderful light-footedness. I did find myself wondering how Greene reconciles his own account to those of the early moderns themselves, who so extensively theorize the workings of language in the rhetoric and logic manuals produced during the period. How does the notion of *synonymia* intersect with Greene's "pendent" words, for instance? I also suspect that medievalists (and indeed Anglo-Saxonists) would dispute his version of the history of resistance, and would point to a wealth of sophisticated theoreticians of language in their own periods who — to my mind — somewhat undermine those moments where Greene attributes epochal change to early modernity (a tendency at odds with his otherwise beautifully attenuated sense of the processes of change over time). Nonetheless, this is a stunningly good book, erudite but lively, informed by a great depth and breadth of reading, and tackling difficult yet very important (some would say urgent) questions. It should be read by everyone with an interest in Renaissance literature, and in language itself.

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