

Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England. Alison V. Scott. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015. viii + 238 pp. \$109.95.

In contrast to those who would identify the eighteenth century as the moment when the idea of luxury was radically transformed from moral vice to public benefit, Alison V. Scott's *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England* carefully traces significant shifts in the meaning of luxury as it was "Englished" in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (3). Specifically, Scott illustrates the ways that early modern writers, in response to increasing economic and commercial developments, engaged with both a medieval Christian view of "luxurie" and with the classical concept of *luxuria*. As she explains, their ambiguous portrayals of luxury anticipate eighteenth-century debates even as they "oppose their so-called demoralizing thrust" (3).

The book's introduction demonstrates that early modern luxury can, and should, be more broadly defined than readers may assume, given its close connections to a number of concepts including lechery, gluttony, avarice, excess, and riot. The main chapters are then divided in three parts, each of which focuses on a different linguistic framework. Scott is first interested in the moral framework and how it is represented by two specific figures of luxury: *The Faerie Queene's* Acrasia (chapter 1) and early modern versions of Cleopatra (chapter 2). Literary scholars will appreciate Scott's contextualizing of Spenser's Bower of Bliss and corresponding explanation of the Knight of Temperance's seemingly immoderate reaction to its pleasures. Those expecting a new reading of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* in chapter 2, however, may be disappointed: most of the chapter is devoted to the figure of Cleopatra as she appears in classical texts and her association with the feminine, and feminizing, concept of Roman *luxuria*. When appropriated by early modern writers, Cleopatra becomes more self-reflexive in her "practice and political exploitations of luxury," a point Scott illustrates by way of Thomas Heywood's *If You Know Not Me* before turning, finally, to Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who, she concludes, conforms to the classical figure of emasculating *luxuria* even as she "re-embodies a Hellenistic aesthetic of luxury as beneficial excess (bounty), pleasure and beauty" (82).

Section 2 transitions to luxury's more material implications, namely, consumption. Chapter 3 interrogates urban representations of luxury in the genre of city satire, which Scott positions, in a move characteristic of her broad range of vision, between Plato's *Republic* and modern accounts of affluenza. In English satires by writers including John Donne, John Marston, and Everard Guilpin, we continue to see both Christian and Roman ideas of luxury in play, but these works also critique luxury through "twin figures of the expanding city and the grotesque physical bodies which interacted with it" (103).

Yet, as Scott explains, the genre of satire is itself luxurious, for it employs affective and aesthetic excess to make its moral judgments (often about excess). Chapter 4 then addresses the apparent “softening” of luxury’s moral threat in comic satires as a response to developments in consumerism. Turning to Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, for example, Scott reads the fox’s “unfixing” not as caused by avarice, but rather his “inherently luxurious” refusal to be “in one role and in ‘glad possession’ of his wealth” (123).

Building on the previous discussions of consumption, the final section turns to luxury’s status as a political and economic idea. Chapter 5 demonstrates that mercantile defenses of trade exempted specific goods and modes of consumption from an intensely moralized idea of luxury, something that is especially apparent in the operation of the New Exchange and the entertainment Jonson provided for its opening. Chapter 6 posits that the Jacobean period’s interest in Roman drama indicates a desire to restage Rome’s explicitly gendered fall to luxury. Scott’s close reading of *Coriolanus*’s Martius as a figure whose austerity produces masculine excess even as he resists feminine excess is convincing, especially when contrasted to Jonson’s Catiline. That said, this would seem an ideal moment to return to the Bower of Bliss: how do Guyon’s actions in the face of luxury compare to Martius’s, and how might their similarities potentially help us appreciate discontinuities in early modern representations of luxury? Such a discussion could help mitigate the reader’s sense that, contrary to Scott’s introductory claims, the book does develop a chronologically progressive account of luxury within the period.

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