Jennifer Feather. *Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature: The Pen and the Sword*.

Early Modern Cultural Studies. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. xvii + 254 pp. $85. ISBN: 978–0–230–12041–9.

Jennifer Feather's new book revisits a traditional historiography in order to revalue it. Her concern is with the way in which representations of combat have been used to imagine the Renaissance as a period of increasing civilization, significantly marked by the rejection of chivalric violence as a dominant social ideal. It is, of course, a view of the Renaissance developed during the Renaissance itself. Roger Ascham memorably claimed in *The Scholemaster* (1570) that little was read in "our forefathers tyme" except romances such as Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, full of "open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye." Feather argues that comments such as Ascham's strategically downplay the continued presence of medieval ideals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while tendentiously masking the involvement of newer, humanist forms of subjectivity in their own characteristic forms of violence. *Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature* therefore joins the ranks of modern studies that seek to dismantle the complacent self-image of Renaissance man. It also attempts to give determinate shape to the premodern subjectivity that is said to be passing away during this period, a theme about which the many existing critiques of the humanist subject are notably vague.

Feather's concern is with violence, real or imagined, when it takes the form of combat, understood as "armed struggle between two individuals" (2). She distinguishes between two models of combat: the premodern and the humanist. In the premodern imagination, exemplified by romances such as Malory's, combat — while never anything less than properly vehement — nonetheless creates a kind of community of interest between the participants. Humanist combat, by way of contrast, is a zero-sum game, used to distinguish absolutely between winners and losers. It fixes and objectifies identity through violence, even while it disavows the violence that is its tool.

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Chapter 1, "Heroic Anatomies," looks at the writings of Andreas Vesalius and at Shakespeare's Roman plays as ways of situating representations of the body in relation to shifting codes of warfare. Vesalius, it is argued, imagines the anatomist heroically conquering the cadaver, while Shakespeare's classical tragedies counterintuitively bear the mark of a premodern, humoral model of identity. It is in many ways the key chapter, firstly in terms of tying combat to histories of subjectivity (for critics such as Jonathan Sawday, anatomy is a point of origin for modern selfhood); but also for establishing the viability of attempts to read between pen and sword, arguing for the presence of combat in what are, literally speaking, nonconfrontational contexts. And I wasn't, in fact, certain that Feather had securely established the presence of combat as a metaphor in Vesalius. Later chapters look at historical heroines (Holinshed's Voadicia, Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Lucrece); at Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* as a Tudor text, playing out in miniature the historical transition that the book charts; and at Artegall's judicial interventions in book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*, focusing in upon the motif of the headless female body as a way of articulating the contrast between Feather's two models of identity. On the whole, they act to substantiate the claims made in chapter 1, and will be full of interest for scholars of the period.

This is a complex and sometimes difficult text, in part because of the way it traces the interrelation between premodern and humanistic models of identity even while trying to map a trajectory leading from the former to the latter. Nonetheless, the overall picture is clear: it is one of the persistence of (what would conventionally be understood as) "the medieval" in Renaissance culture, and of a Renaissance more violent than it might like to imagine itself. Feather's study is best understood, therefore, as a deconstruction of the pretensions of the humanist subject more than as a challenge to period terms as such, since the overall direction of historical movement is taken as read. But it is this attempt to use the logic of violence to reassess both residual and emergent ideals, one which runs in parallel to its own negotiation between old and new ways of understanding the period, that makes *Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature* a notable and innovative study.

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