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Book Reviews

Manuscript Love Poems and Libels

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Joshua Eckhardt, *Manuscript Verse Collectors and the Politics of Anti-Courtly Love Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 306 pp.

As Joshua Eckhardt notes in his book's first chapter, our English Renaissance manuscript heritage has until recently been valued (if at all) as a source of authorial or generically significant texts (p. 10). Only during the past twenty years or so have scholars recognized that scribal culture is in itself a fascinating and significant part of the literate and literary past quite worthy of study in its own right. Eckhardt explores here a very specific aspect of that culture, how compilers of transcribed anthologies of verse juxtaposed and thus recontextualized some of the poems they copied in order to amplify or contradict the original effects those works produced.

Eckhardt defines "anti-courtly love poetry" in Chapter 1 as a lyric sub-genre that parodied and undermined the "courtly love poetry" he describes as originating "at the late Elizabethan court," especially in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and the lyrics of Sir Walter Ralegh (p. 7). These flippant, often bawdy "anti-courtly" poems ignored or subverted Petrarchan conventions to produce both literary and political satire for, Eckhardt contends, attacks on the style of courtly verse also condemned the court at which it originated. The main thrust of this book is to show how these anti-courtly love poems engaged with libels upon early Stuart courtiers to enhance the intensity of satiric attack. Eckhardt surveys the

variety of ways in which manuscript anthologies were compiled and traces the dissemination of anti-courtly verse to its epicenter at Cambridge in the 1580s, where it received initial impetus from Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Elegies* and Nashe's pornographic "Choice of Valentines." These works influenced later poetry in the same vein by Sir John Davies, Shakespeare, Donne, and many others.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the political, anti-courtly import of Donne's Elegy 8, "To his Mistress Going to Bed," based on allegorical readings of the poem as an attack on Ralegh and above all his acquisition of power through his (courtly) poetic wooing of Queen Elizabeth. When Donne's elegy is followed in Stowe MS 962, for example, by an outright attack on Ralegh, and then by one of the very poems Ralegh used to woo Elizabeth, Donne's poem has been contextualized to attack Ralegh as well (46). Donne's Elegies 10 and 13, "The Anagram" and "The Autumnal," are regularly cited as examples of anti-courtly poems, along with the anonymous "Nay pish, nay pue," and Francis Beaumont's "Ad Comitissam Rutlandiae" ("Madam, so may my verses pleasing be").

In what follows, Eckhardt analyzes the interrelationships among poems in a broad sampling of early Stuart manuscript anthologies to argue that their compilers imparted enhanced or inflected meanings to political libels based on their resonance with the surrounding anti-courtly love poems. Chapter 3 concerns poetic responses to the "Somerset" marriage of Elizabeth Howard to Robert Carr in 1614, and the couple's subsequent imprisonment for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Chapter 4 deals with libels targeting George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. An initial group of verse satires attacked Buckingham's advocacy of the "Spanish Match," Prince Charles's unsuccessful courtship of the Infanta in 1623, and its aftermath. Eckhardt examines the religious, explicitly anti-Catholic dimensions of this initiative and the way it elicited a poetic reincarnation of Queen Elizabeth as the ideal Protestant monarch who nurtured the best interests of all her subjects in contrast with the corrupt Jacobean regime. He notes here as well that verse libels attacking Buckingham at this time, especially "The Five Senses," leveled charges of homosexual royal favoritism that libelers had declined to use in their poetic attacks on Carr (p. 118).

Chapter 5 analyzes poetic reactions to Buckingham's defeat at the Ile de Ré and his assassination by John Felton. Building upon his preceding analysis, Eckhardt shows how anthologists collected libels that developed

an increasingly corrupt picture of royal favorites, from the relatively benign, queen-seducing Ralegh, to the inept, pro-Catholic, sodomitic Buckingham (pp. 136–137). Moreover, the anthologists copied poetic defenses of Felton in the context of anti-courtly lyrics and attacks on Buckingham to instill a comprehensive anti-court sentiment to these sections of their miscellanies. Throughout, the emphasis is on how scribes recontextualized anti-courtly love poems to amplify the anti-courtly thrust of these libels.

This book is at its best in explaining the biographical-historical contexts in which all the poems it treats—courtly, anti-courtly, and libelous—were composed. The narrative is clear, concise, and jargon-free. It makes skillful use of prior scholarship as well, showing, for example, how Thomas Bastard's printed epigram satirizing the generic merchant "Gaeta" was transformed into a specific attack on Somerset, a textbook example of a "recontextualized" poem. Appendix 1 offers a useful anthology of the anti-courtly love poems and verse libels at the heart of this study that are not readily available in modern editions. Appendix 2 provides detailed bibliographic descriptions of thirty-three manuscript anthologies in order to establish that their scribes "compiled the miscellanies and juxtaposed the texts that pertain to this study" (p. 207). Eckhardt has invested a great deal of time and effort in these descriptions, especially in charting the order and format of the gatherings that make up each volume, and locating the watermarks throughout. Future students of these anthologies will benefit greatly from his meticulous work here. And while these manuscripts provide most of the examples in support of his thesis, Eckhardt's "Index of Manuscripts Cited" shows that he has consulted a very wide range of other materials from more than fifty collections including such out-of-the-way archives as Cheshire, Yorkshire, and Derbyshire record offices, the Durham Cathedral Library, and one manuscript housed at the University of Kansas.

As both literary history and an analysis of manuscript culture, this study rests on a number of assumptions that may prove debatable. True, the Tudor tradition of Petrarchan love lyrics originated at the court of Henry VIII in the writings of Wyatt, Surrey, and other courtiers. But the genre was subsequently appropriated and developed by a host of popular out-of-court poets including Turberville, Gascoigne, Daniel, and Drayton. To what extent, then, would an anti-courtly love poem as

subversive of the Petrarchan conventions as, say, Donne's "The Anagram," necessarily arouse anti-*court* sentiments in Jacobean readers? Eckhardt also assumes that manuscript anthologists edited their collections by carefully arranging the order of the poems they copied. Yet it seems likely that many of these miscellanies were compiled in chronological order as the poems came to hand and as blank spaces were found to squeeze in newly acquired items. If, furthermore, these scribes were consciously recontextualizing some of the poems they copied, what accounts for the gaps between many of the allegedly interrelated entries? We are told, for example, that a bawdy love poem on f. 188v of Folger MS V.a.339 "resonates" with the Somerset libels that occur some five folios (ten pages), and more than a half-dozen unrelated poems later (p. 28). Anti-courtly love poems in Egerton MS 2230 are separated from a cluster of Somerset libels by "half a quire of blank pages" (p. 89). Four pages in Rosenbach MS 239/27 separate anti-courtly love poems from the pair of verse attacks on Buckingham that follow them (p. 124). Is it clear that most readers would have noticed connections between poems separated in this fashion? If the miscellanies' compilers intended these poems to influence one another's meanings, why didn't they copy them back to back in order to maximize the effects?

Such compiler intention is, moreover, crucial to the book's thesis as a scholarly undertaking (which it undeniably is). Although Eckhardt offers a lukewarm disavowal of intentionality in Chapter 1 (p. 14), the rest of his narrative and Appendix 2 acknowledge its centrality to his efforts to illuminate the past, one of scholarship's most important functions. Without affirming scribal intentionality in the ordering of these poems, the book becomes instead a celebration of the critic's ingenuity in juxtaposing them to produce a variety of cumulative effects. Neither the manuscript anthologies nor their compilers would be necessary, even relevant to that endeavor. In this light, it might be interesting and potentially more productive to apply the methodology of how poems work together to printed anthologies, where editorial arrangement of the poems seems a relative certainty.

Manuscript Verse Collectors and the Politics of Anti-Courtly Love Poetry calls into question the overall nature of manuscript miscellany formation. Did scribes select and arrange the poems they copied to reflect and express their political beliefs? Were they creating, not casual assortments of poems, but uniform, thesis-driven books of verse? Eckhardt

establishes that Rawlinson poet. MS 160 is one such document, a politically consistent Puritan anthology (p. 143). Others could be cited, along with similarly monolithic pro-Catholic miscellanies. He notes as well, however, that the mix of poems in Ashmole MS 38 includes "too diverse a range of early Stuart libels" for its compiler "to have agreed personally with all of them" (p. 160). This coincides with Andrew McRae's finding that anthologies reflecting a "consistent political position" are unusual, and that the libels themselves "were often as much literary exercises as impassioned statements."[1] Much remains to be said, I think, about the nature of manuscript miscellanies as miscellanies, and as collections formed in response to literary taste as well as political and religious allegiance.

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[1]McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 43.