

Troping the Furniture

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Jeanne Shami, ed., *Renaissance Tropologies: The Cultural Imagination of Early Modern England*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008. x + 382 pp.

This collection of twelve essays is a tribute to the late Gale H. Carrithers, Jr. Its title and its inspiration derive from his work and that of his scholarly collaborator James D. Hardy, Jr., specifically from their last published volume *Age of Iron: English Renaissance Tropologies of Love and Power* (1998). The editor succinctly and elegantly acknowledges Carrithers's achievement as a leading commentator on Renaissance literature and also warmly applauds the ideal of collaborative scholarship. It should be said at the outset that Jeanne Shami is no less distinguished and generous a contributor to scholarship and to her chosen intellectual community, the John Donne Society. This present, welcome volume carries forward and enriches discussion of the teasingly protean character of the early modern mind, or, as the subtitle has it, the "cultural imagination." This phenomenon does not yield its secrets to crude interrogation nearly as well as it does to nuanced teasing out of "habits of thought." Hence the four major tropes derived from Carrithers and Hardy that organize the contents into sections: Theater, Moment, Journey, and Ambassadorship. A final group of essays is headed "Tropology and Habits of Thought."

What qualifies as a "trope?" Shami's Introduction wisely declines to offer a definition of "trope" as, for instance, a turn in the meaning of words accomplished by one or another rhetorical device. Rather, following Auerbach, she characterizes "trope" as a "'middle term' between history and language" (p. 3). Thus she sets in motion the subsequent

wide-ranging discussion of what activity tropes perform in animating static explanatory structures (p. 3). Donne is at the forefront of the action because his “writings are a lens through which to understand his culture, not because he is representative but because he is unique” (p. 5). And he is “a lens through which to gain access to . . . moments of cultural crisis” (p. 6). In this way the editor disarms potential criticism that the subtitle of the volume might be unjustified because of the absence from its pages, and even more so from its index, of many of those whom we think of as the makers of the early modern world, not only its English dimension. In a work with a strong sense of the historical moment evident in its various essays, no historians, cartographers, scientists, physicians—to pick just a few categories—appear. This approach is something of a challenge. Donne is called in to redress the balance: “his writings explore the most controversial, provocative, and exciting questions of his day [and] articulate situations in their most complex forms and expose the faultlines of their religious, political, and cultural occasions” (pp. 5–6).

As a lens concentrates light, so it becomes an attractive metaphor for a type of intellectual inquiry that aims to do its work unencumbered by the great diffuse “-isms” of cultural and historical discourse—Humanism, Antinomianism, Puritanism, etc. (“capitalism” is an exception here). Perhaps it is a strategy we shall see more frequently: a recent study of Erasmus, himself an “-ism” (“alternative to Calvinism”), finds him to be “a unique and useful lens for investigating English religious culture.”¹

Every so often, at intervals governed by a probably inscrutable algorithm, the intellectual furniture needs to be changed or at least rearranged, re-trope, one might say. 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Herbert J. C. Grierson’s death and the eighty-fourth anniversary of his lectures in the “Evolution of Civilization” series at Cornell that were published and republished as *Cross Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century; or, the World, the Flesh & the Spirit, their Actions & Reactions*. Grierson’s influence on the twentieth-century study of early modern literature needs no underlining. He arranged large, imposing furniture, and did so with panache. His confidence in the durability of the “common tradition” of which literature is the bedrock and the

¹Gregory D. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. xiv.

foundation of all that has been achieved from Greece and Rome to the present day, is unshakeable. Over this rock flow, in his easy and reassuring metaphor, cross currents of religious and secular thought in creative tension. Montaigne is his guide to that “emancipation of the imagination” which is the essence of the Renaissance. In his ninety-first year, reassessing his work, he was in no doubt that the theme of his subtitle is in “no danger of becoming outmoded.”²

It is tempting to envy Grierson his wide and lucid vision: nowadays re-arranging the furniture seems a much more strenuous exercise, more like Blake’s “mental strife,” wrestling with other disciplines, especially the social sciences, for possession and authority. Or else, in moments of gloom—the common tradition gone and the common reader a fable—it’s just shifting deck chairs on that old, doomed vessel, *Literae Humaniores*.

Carrithers and Hardy would not, I think, deny Grierson his subtitle’s grip—their tropes are “filtered through profoundly religious lenses” (p. 5)—but “trope” requires some delicate footwork. Shami explains: “Carrithers and Hardy recognize the historical moment as at once a specific time and yet no longer fixable in language or representation, and they establish a newer historical grounding for integrating literary, religious, and social experience.” “Trope,” then, is the “‘middle-term’ between history and language” (p. 3).

The first essay, Carrithers’s and Hardy’s “Rex Absconditus: Justice, Presence, and Legitimacy in *Measure for Measure*” focuses on an historical moment—the coronation of Elizabeth I, in the context of Shakespeare’s probing of monarchy and its discontents. Yet, in discussing *Measure for Measure*, the authors do not press upon its most vexing conundrum: who shall be sufficient to bear the “sword of Heaven.” St. Paul gives seemingly incompatible prescriptions: in Romans 2:1 he echoes and expands Matthew 7:1, “Judge not that ye be not judged,” while Romans 13:4 declares that the magistrate “beareth not the sword for nought, for he is the minister of God to take vengeance on him that doeth euil.”³ These apparently irreconcilable injunctions greatly troubled early modern Christendom and its magistrates, including King James who, in *Basilikon*

²Grierson, “Preface to the 1958 Edition,” in *Cross Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century; Or, the World, the Flesh & the Spirit, their Actions & Reactions*, new ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), p. xvi.

³These quotations are from the Geneva Bible.

doron chooses to side with Romans 13:4, declaring that the king, by the power of the sword, clad in the military cloak, is not merely or only a layman “as both the Papistes and Anabaptistes would haue him; to the which error also the puritans incline ouer-farre.”⁴ When Carrithers and Hardy discuss the “He who the sword of heaven will bear” soliloquy they interpret “craft against vice” as Machiavellian in the sense of ends justifying means (p. 41). But King James is instructive here: “But aboue all virtues, studie to know vvell your owne craft, vwich is to rule your people.”⁵ James’s advice to his son is relevant to *Measure for Measure* in many other ways. Nonetheless, Carrithers and Hardy do provide a fine exposition of the meaning of coronation as hallowed theater, in which the recognition of the monarch’s legitimacy is the central action. This is the sole essay under the trope “Theater.”

The next section, “Moment,” starts with Eric C. Brown’s “Salvific Moments in John Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*.” The central concern of the essay is with Donne’s use of Augustine throughout the *Devotions*—by no means a new insight as Brown acknowledges—but here discussed with special attention to Augustine’s sense of time or times. The essay strives to wrest some clear insight from this juxtaposition, but the going is hard and sometimes opaque. A cryptic passage on Newton’s (not in the index) “mathematics of the infinite” (p. 48) (lacking references) looks intriguing, but falls somewhat short of clarifying the argument, which concludes that Donne’s salvific moment “reveals the possibilities for unification with the divine, both despite and because of time” (p. 62).

“Are Donne’s politics any more appealing” than those of Carl Schmitt, asks Greg Kneidel (p. 65). Schmitt (1888–1985)—anti-Semite, political theorist of National Socialism and putative godfather of the USA’s neo-conservative think tank, those authors of strategies for the “war on terror,” including enhanced interrogation and Guantanamo—seems an unlikely bedfellow for Donne, and that is Donne the love poet. Kneidel prepares the ground of his question by critically reviewing positions expressed by T. S. Eliot, Samuel Johnson, Carrithers and Hardy, William Empson and David Norbrook, along with

⁴James I, *Basilikon doron. Or His Maiesties instructions to his dearest sonne, Henry the prince* (London: Felix Kyngston, for Iohn Norton, 1603), p. 110.

⁵James I, p. 83.

commentators on twentieth-century political theorists. “Donne and the State of Exception” is the title: exception as suspension or interruption of the flow of life or thought that we tend to require as the condition of civil, liberal society. How Donne poetically exercises exception and what Schmitt advocates as necessary exceptions exercised by the state (his intellectual hero is Hobbes) are vigorously pursued. The range of Kneidel’s erudition and his tenacity in seeking out the significance of his central question make for compelling reading. The sense of mental strife flavors this audacious, unusual essay.

Jeanne Shami’s “Troping Religious Identity: Circumcision and Transubstantiation in Donne’s Sermons” goes a long way to justifying her choice of Donne as the lens, explained in her Introduction. The essay also finely illustrates Donne’s uniqueness in taking and exceeding the traditional resources of language (p. 116). Shami’s profound engagement with the Sermons allows her moments in which she can affirm or adjust her former understanding of Donne’s metaphorical imagination. This punctilious caution is especially apt when exploring the implications—theological, ecclesiastical, political, and polemical—of those extraordinarily freighted terms, circumcision and transubstantiation, in the usage of one who “strains the linguistic boundaries of the terms he employs” (p. 92). A brief review of scholarship on Donne and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist confirms the problem. Donne’s attitude has been seen as eclectic in his evocation of different formulations, as problematic or elusive, or even evasive (p. 109). This essay brings the reader much closer to understanding Donne’s dilemma, his purpose and his achievement. For instance, we see Donne’s troping on circumcision in the context of two events of 1624/25: the relaxation of penal laws against Roman Catholics and the marriage treaty of Prince Charles to the Catholic princess, Henriette Maria. We also see him “boldly redefining” the real presence to open up “a space for Roman Catholic believers, church papists, and recusants” to redefine their religious identity in the English Church (p. 115). There is also the question of whether, on occasion, he satirizes post-Trent Roman theology (in language not unlike passages in *Pseudo-Martyr*). But these aims never eclipse the imperative of his quest for the real, spiritual meaning of these words, circumcision and transubstantiation. The final line, adapting Blake, glances at Brown’s conclusion (quoted above): the experience of Donne’s auditory “when

'commerce' twixt heaven and earth reanimated the carcass of the dead world, when, paradoxically, eternity was in love with the productions of time" (p. 117).

The first of two essays addressing the trope "Journey" is Susannah Monta's "Vaughan's Life of Paulinus: Recharting the Royalist Journey." Vaughan's loose translation of the Jesuit Francesco Sacchini's life of St Paulinus (1621), is "little known even among Vaughan scholars" (p. 124). It was printed in *Flores Solitudinis* (1654), but its date of composition is unknown. Monta deftly situates this work in Vaughan's spiritual journey as anticipating emphases of the second volume of *Silex Scintillans*. Patience in enforced retreat, or in many instances, exile, is the major theme of royalist writing both public and private. Monta shows how Vaughan fashions from his materials an *imitatio sanctorum* to sustain the royalist Anglican community (p. 126). This, of course, fits the powerful tendency in Vaughan's poetry to the private and inward cultivation of holiness. But what Monta reveals in the *Life of Paulinus* is a less tranquil Vaughan, "more combative than has been recognized" (p. 126). In fact, Monta convincingly demonstrates that Paulinus became the site of controversy over church practice and doctrine and that Vaughan is participating in the "polemical positioning of Paulinus" (p. 129). This detailed and well-illustrated discussion amounts to a re-assessment of Vaughan's role in the post-civil war period. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Monta is out to expose the political reality of Vaughan's work beneath conventional piety. On the contrary, she states that the most important aspect of Carrithers's work is to expose the error of reading "through religion to discover something presumably more important;" Vaughan "reads through politics to discover religion" (p. 122). This fundamental insight shapes the essay's coherence.

A. E. B. Coldiron studies the literal journey of Mary Tudor (Henry VIII's sister, 1496–1533) in September 1514 to Paris to marry Louis XII as the occasion for pageants and poems that greeted the princess at stages *en route*. Interpretation of these literary events is the essay's aim. Coldiron's study is a useful contribution to a trend in recent years of literary scholarship to read the significance of civic pageantry such as royal progresses and Lord Mayors' Shows. The opulence of such affairs often strikes the modern sensibility most forcefully. So, perhaps, the question that we might pose regarding World Fairs, and the like, "What did they get in return for such outlay?" requires scholarly attention

attuned to the cultural imagination. The literal journey is “rendered spectacular, participatory, public and figurative” (p. 151). Coldiron draws a useful parallel to help explain to book-bound readers the relationship of representative and interpretive modes as a “performed version of hermeneutics found in the margins of literary and theological texts, where a central text is surrounded by exegetical commentary, glosses, allegories, references to *auctoritates*, and metatextual self-references” (p. 152). It is not surprising that a literary-interpretive lens can de-historicize as when Arthur and Charlemagne are equated as legendary kings (p. 158) when the latter (742–814) is historically factual, even though there are legends and fabulous accretions to his story. But the essay is filled with fascinating historical information, some of it almost surreal. A fine moment in this regard is Coldiron’s account of the proxy-consummation ritual performed at Greenwich even before the start of the journey itself.

The first of two essays under the rubric “Ambassadorship” is Alexandra Mills Block’s “Eucharistic Semiotics and the Representational Formulas of Donne’s Ambassadors.” Instances of Donne’s deployment of the trope of ambassadorship, which “has drawn limited critical attention” (p. 179) range from his poem to Mr Tilman, in which the mission is from earth to heaven; “To Sir Henry Wotton, at his going Ambassador to Venice,” a sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:20, heaven to earth; and the verse epistle “To Mr T. W.,” on the dangers of misrepresentation. Block’s approach is to focus on semiotic models which she derives from different and competing perceptions of the Eucharist. Much, probably all, of this is familiar, that without new perspectives, little is added by her account of the “lengthy controversy over the Eucharist, which raged in England” etc. (p. 180). There is no common reader for whom such an account would be useful. Admittedly, it is difficult to judge the degree of background required for such a discussion—it was clearer in Grierson’s time. More effective is the close reading brought to bear on, for example, the significance of “bare” in “bare Sacrament” (p. 181). The final image is of Donne’s “mining of the Eucharistic debate for semiotic models he can adapt for literary use” (p. 185).

“Donne and Diplomacy” by Hugh Adlington is the companion piece in “Ambassadorship.” He also visits Donne’s 2 Corinthians 5:20 sermon with attention to the question of “how it is that Donne’s religio-political identity continues to be so variously construed” (p. 189). Not

surprisingly, then, Adlington presents a different Donne—or different side of Donne—than Block. Donne's experience of diplomatic activity—what is known and what is probable—is reviewed to very good effect. This leads to a close examination of the rhetoric of the Heidelberg Sermon of 16 June 1619. Adlington points out that although allusions to ambassadorship are few in the poetry, “allusions to spies and spying (diplomacy's disreputable cousin) are strewn throughout the poems” (p. 193). Donne's metaphorical use of ambassadorship is to be found in sermons (p. 194). What emerges in this fascinating essay is a nuanced understanding of Donne's diplomatic rhetoric in orations intended for a cosmopolitan auditory, and hence a new understanding of the Heidelberg Sermon.

The late Albert C. Labriola bequeaths to this volume a gem of elegant scholarship: “Dangerous Liaisons: ‘Spider Love’ in John Donne's ‘Twickenham Garden.’” With his characteristic precision, Labriola, after reviewing briefly some critical positions, explicates precisely the phrase “spider love” (p. 220). This is accomplished by examination of Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) and a wide range of Renaissance texts that describe the activity of spiders. Inevitably Donne's relationship with Lucy, Countess Bedford, arises. Labriola's brilliant exegesis of the text—free of theory jargon—alert, as always, to Donnian punning, wit, and multivalency, concludes that the poem is a witty compliment to the countess “by an author who expresses his personal self under the protective guise of a poetic persona” (p. 228).

Ilona Bell's essay finely exemplifies what a keen sense of material culture can yield in literary appreciation. “Mirror Tropes and Renaissance Poetry” ranges widely and boldly across the Petrarchan inheritance of English poetry informed by a history of the mirror (the noun first appearing in English c. 1300) and “glass” (used interchangeably): “the material, metaphorical, and exemplary meanings are deeply intertwined” (p. 230). Bell traces technological advances in glass and mirror making with particular attention to the Venetians' invention of crystalline, backed by tin amalgam, mirrors of “unprecedented, startling clarity that seemed all but miraculous” (p. 231). This new wonder played an important part in the “rebirth of classical learning and the emerging scientific revolution” (p. 233) as well as, arguably, Renaissance individualism—an idea the essay debates. Starting from Petrarch's sonnet 45's mirror trope, Bell's investigation takes in Spenser, Daniel,

Shakespeare, and Donne's revolutionary transformation of the Petrarchan discourse. The epigraph of the essay—Hamlet's setting up a glass for Gertrude to see her inmost part—is brought into play in the final section, "Interiority and Subjectivity" with thoughts on "fluidity, interiority, and self-reflection" (p. 253).

Kate Narveson's essay "The *Ars Longa* trope in a Sublunary World" is a fresh and penetrating study of a perennial theme that can reasonably be construed as "a trope that defines the Renaissance in the popular imagination" (p. 255). From classical antiquity—it might equally justly be called the defining trope of Latin literature—this trope takes on a new twist in early modern England. Indeterminacy and conceptual flux influence the developing concept of the author (p. 256). Narveson nicely characterizes poetic immortality "not as 'being' in the Platonic sense, but as continuance in the social world," although in tension with this concept was the emerging alternative of the book as bearer of the author's spirit (p. 258). The book, and especially the poem, want to break "free of the temporal axis" to join in "an unchanging perfect order" (p. 259). One might add that the poem was destined to outdo even great deeds in prestige: General Wolfe at Québec, concluding his recitation of Gray's *Elegy*, said he would prefer "being the author of that poem to the glory of beating the French tomorrow." However the poets ingeniously figure their immortality—for instance, immortalizing the subject, associating the self with already immortalized classics, creating a literary monument, or by procreating further hymns in the case of Donne's *Second Anniversary*—"we find, in fact, that the immortality poets envision is nearly always secular, undying fame within the world governed by time" (p. 267). "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil": Milton's Phoebus should be taken with a grain of salt. Milton did.

The final essay, Stephen Pender's "Habits of Thought, Structures of Feeling" has an appropriately summarizing feel to it. The term "habits of thought" Carrithers and Hardy borrow from Deborah Shuger, who "reinvigorated the history of meaning by focusing on figures and questions that social and cultural historians had largely ignored" (pp. 282–283). This prompts Pender's inquiry into the history of the term starting with Helkiah Crook's 1613 usage, after which Pender constructs a forensic account. At the end of this survey Pender concludes that "as a concept, habits of thought was rarely normative, was used to laud specific ways of thinking and denigrate others, and was subject to frequent

redescription" (p. 295). Shifting to "structures of feeling" Pender engages with work of political historians and cultural historians, notably Raymond Williams's "semantic materialism" (p. 300). At places where Pender seems especially personally engaged the tone is abrasive: writers "insist" on their arguments which are "precisely" this or that. This quibble aside, the essay is a valuable exposition of powerful and conflicting attitudes that have governed the world of literary scholarship in recent modernity, and shifted the intellectual furniture.

This is a collection that one will want to read and consult more than once. It is a pity, then, that the Press did not provide an adequate index. Otherwise, despite a few typos, it is well produced and uncramped. A list of works cited at the end of each essay would have been a welcome flourish.

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