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Book Reviews

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Helen Wilcox, *1611: Authority, Gender and the Word in Early Modern England*, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2014. xvi+253 pp.

As its title suggests, Helen Wilcox's *1611: Authority, Gender and the Word in Early Modern England* explores the writings associated with a single year, which she persuasively establishes as a significant historical moment. The distinction of its author's earlier writings encourages one to approach this book with high expectations—hopes that are not disappointed.

The study encompasses not only print publications first appearing in 1611 but also the variable forms a particular text might assume simultaneously or sequentially, such as revised editions or notes on and print versions of oral sermons; moreover, it demonstrates "the vibrancy and rhetorical energy" (ix) manifest in documents like letters. Hence this volume incorporates a wide range of materials, from canonical and indisputably "literary" texts such as *The Tempest* to memorial statues of women, collections of music, and a Jesuit linguistic manual; each chapter focuses primarily on one work but proceeds to situate it in relation to many others. And *1611* repeatedly emphasizes dialogues among literary texts and their interactions with other cultural events.

Yet another source of breadth: *1611* not only recurs to the issues in its subtitle and their interrelations (thus the installation of a Lord Mayor demonstrates the imbrication of language and political authority as well as of various cultures and social strata) but also treats many other subjects, such as an interest in dissection, literal and otherwise. The author's sound emphasis on texts published outside London, notably in the two major university towns, generates an additional type of capaciousness.

If this study centers on a particular moment in English literary and cultural history, it also demonstrates the potentialities of the second decade of the twenty-first century, our moment in our own profession. Our long term heritage from new historicism, however discredited the movement in its original forms may be in some circles, clearly includes promising approaches to the interaction between texts that are literary in the traditional senses and cultural documents; like the very best new historicists (though not their less acute colleagues) and like many more recent critics, Wilcox avoids both the temptation to see the literary examples as passive reflections of their culture and the tendency to ignore aesthetic achievements completely. Another preoccupation of criticism today, analyses of periodization, manifest in many conference panels and a recent collection generated by a Folger symposium, will be advanced by *16ll.* Similarly, this book is shaped by and in turn shapes our current interest in the interplay among media, notably art, music, and language (indeed, *1611* offers yet another rebuttal, were more needed, when students of twentieth- and twenty-first century texts claim multimedia productions as a distinctive contribution of these eras). While not erasing the insights into silenced women in first-generation feminist work of the 1980s, the book builds on and extends more recent demonstrations of the ways the subaltern can indeed on occasion speak, a subject also effectively explored in the collection Wilcox edited, *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700.*

Such approaches encourage insight into certain genres. Critics of Donne will be pleased to see the significance of sermons, emphasized in ground-breaking work by Jeanne Shami and other members of the John Donne Society, substantiated and further explored here; in particular, discussions of the sermons of John Frewen exemplify the rewards of Wilcox's incorporation of many cultural texts long hidden in archives in the older sense of rare books libraries and microfilms. The

volume also contributes a range of valuable perspectives on other writings. Wilcox shapes, for example, a fine analysis of *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly*, a masque unduly neglected in studies of Jonson's better known ones; the extensive discussion of George Chapman's treatment of Homer is crammed with compelling observations on everything from syntactical maneuvers to the politics of paratexts.

The author's prose makes all these discussions engaging. Her style is always lucid and professional but never pretentious. She occasionally intersperses witty phrases like "this whirl of crime and creativity" (95) or "the distinctive 'repast' of *Janua Linguarum* was certainly gobbled up" (171). Since all members of English Departments bear the responsibility of teaching writing, whether through composition courses or through attention to students' essays in literature classes, the style of our colleagues' books is and should be a significant criterion when evaluating their work.

Some lapses in this volume are the downside of or exceptions to its other strengths, and a couple of problems may be the less happy results of this moment in our profession. Although many readings are subtle and persuasive, the number of texts covered may help to explain why certain other commentaries are familiar. Students of Donne as well as many other writers will be grateful for the emphasis on sermons but aware that most of the description of them, unlike its analogues on other topics, covers well-known ground. A commitment to bold claims has in many circles uprooted the caution that characterized many critics of earlier generations (once upon a time, "sound" was a term of high praise). In this instance, despite the balanced approach that characterizes most of the book, certain statements invite the advice Britomart receives on her own multimedia tour of Busirane's castle: "Be bold, be bold, be not too bold." For example, the attempts to define the significance of gender in Aemelia Lanyer's country-house poems generate some problematical generalizations about male contributions to that genre, and Lanyer's assignment of blame for the Fall in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* surely does not exonerate Eve to the extent that Wilcox claims. Similarly, too, although the book is indubitably persuasive on the significance of 1611, its goal of demonstrating distinctions from other neighboring years occasionally is grounded in shaky evidence, notably when the book posits a significant shift between the optimism of 1611 and the pessimism of the succeeding

year and finds in Webster's 1612 *White Devil* "a genuine shift of dramatic mood" (217).

Might the book also reflect another regrettable symptom of our current critical moment? Whereas the comments on formal features and the impact of specific words of Herbert's poems are among the many strengths of Wilcox's magisterial edition of that poet, and some allusions to such issues indubitably enrich *1611*, that book devotes less attention proportionately to such analyses than its author's other work despite the commitment of *1611* to "the word." One hopes the difference is merely the inevitable result of commenting on so many different texts within a relatively thin volume rather than the price we sometimes pay now for our emphasis on many types of authorship, including that of printers and readers. Doesn't this focus risk distracting too much attention from craft in the sense creative writers use that term or, to put it another way, to techne in the respect that may sometimes involve the participation of those other agents but remains primarily the purview of the author in the more traditional senses?

But in any event, as I have already suggested, *1611* both exemplifies and extends many strengths of its author's earlier work. Most obviously, the scholarly thoroughness that graces this book is evident throughout her definitive edition of Herbert, which is scaffolded with thoughtful interactions with critics of many generations. Her commitment to tracing wide-ranging, not merely predictable or surface, connections among literary texts and between those texts and other cultural manifestations is manifest throughout that edition, not least in the chronological biography which, like its counterpart in the coedited collection on women's writings, is far more comprehensive than analogous listings by many other critics. Similarly, her collection *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700* emphasizes the interaction between literary and other cultural events both by precept in the introduction and by example through its own chronological listings. And her emphasis on the dialogues between devotional and secular poetry appears as well in the bold title of the co-edited volume of essays: *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane.*

In these and many other ways, then, *1611: Authority, Gender and the Word in Early Modern England* both mirrors and also reaches beyond Helen Wilcox's other publications. Intelligently conceived, extensively

researched, thoughtfully argued, this book testifies again to the valuable professional authority of its author's words.

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