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Herrick, Cultural Clout, and the Burden of Simplicity

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Leah S. Marcus. *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986. Pp. 319.

Ann Baynes Coiro. *Robert Herrick's "Hesperides" and the Epigram Book Tradition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988. Pp. 272.

> A colleague of mine, one of the finest teachers and readers of poetry I know, recently confessed to me that perhaps the most dispiriting class he'd ever taught took place when he decided to devote the hour entirely to a few short lyrics of Herrick. Here were poems of winsome delicacy, poise, concision, wit, and they proved brutally intractable as instruments for discussion. Transparency was their great charm--a virtue, it turned out, in little need of any pedagogue's "throwing light" upon it.
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> —Brad Leithauser, "The Hard Life of the Lyric," *The New Republic*, May 23, 1988

It was almost exactly one hundred years ago when Swinburne pronounced that, as Shakespeare was the greatest English dramatist, Herrick was the greatest English song writer: "Nothing more but nothing less." Among other things, Swinburne's judgment relected a fin de siècle view of aesthetics, best articulated in English by Pater, that poetry should aspire to the condition of music. Now, near the end of yet another century, the remark is worth recalling because it helped to establish the critical context for a good many discussions of Herrick's poetry in between, both pro and con. F. R. Leavis, for instance, reacting *against*

much that was late Victorian, including perhaps F. W. Moorman's Swinburnian *Robert Herrick* (1910), with its convenient division of *Hesperides* into "lyrical" and "non-lyrical" poems, followed out one strand when in 1935 he charged Herrick with being "trivially charming" ("charming" recollecting again the association of Herrick with song). And a few years later, Eliot gave another twist to the same strand in "What is Minor Poetry?" Like Leavis, he found Herrick not to be a "metaphysical" poet (this time the comparison was with Herbert rather than Carew and Marvell) and rather ordinary, although in a pleasantly charming way. "It is [his] honest *ordinariness* which gives the charm."

There should be nothing surprising about the persistent association of Herrick with song. After all, in "His Prayer to Ben Jonson," the poet himself whimsically cinched the connection by rhyming "Herrick" with "lyric." But it is a little disarming to discover how much of the critical debate subsequent to Leavis and Eliot has been conducted in the terms they, along with Swinburne, helped to initiate, even if Herrick's artistry was now being defended and sometimes in very able ways, from Cleanth Brooks to Gordon Braden. As recent as 1974, in fact, A. Leigh DeNeef achieved a critical feat of a kind when he subdivided his *"This Poetic Liturgie": Robert Herrick's Ceremonial Mode* into ten sections, each calling attention to a different aspect of the poet's voice ("The Classical Voice," "The Domestic Voice," etc.), and then replicated this sense of Herrick as a fully disembodied lyricist in the central argument defining "the ceremonial mode":

> In the ceremonial mode . . . the reader is not referred to elements outside the poem and is not expected to commit further action on the basis of what is given in the poem. Of course, no reader comes to a poem devoid of other experiences, and no poem of any value can fail to affect the reader's "extra-poetic" life. The point is rather that the consciousness of the ceremonial poem is directed inwards, not outwards: the reader is not asked to *do* anything more than experience the poem. That experience itself is made as deliberately satisfying and complete as possible. In this sense, the ceremonial poem is a "closed" form. The poetic experience does not point itself toward any other kind of action.

This kind of response is exactly what worried Leavis when he referred to Herrick as being "trivially charming" although not "altogether negligible." Herrick's poetry, Leavis remarked, fails to "refer us outside itself. . . . 'Let us,' he virtually says, 'be sweetly and deliciously sad,' and we are to be absorbed in the game, the 'solemn' rite." Like Swinburne, Leavis knew a siren when he met one.

Since the appearance of DeNeef's book, Herrick has continued to appeal to critics; in quantity of publications, he continues to outdistance Carew (about whom the authoritative book is still to be written by a considerable margin). But the terms have shifted, and it is no longer the poet's charm, in its manifold regional as well as lyrical claims, that principally occupies the scholarly establishment. At almost the exact moment when Roger Rollins was reporting (fortunately in quotation marks) a "'revisionist'" view of Herrick as "a serious and significant artist rather than a minor if skillful craftsman," others were discovering something else: that "Herrick" also rhymed, although less neatly and without the poet's blessings, with "politic." Included in the 1978 publication of the Dearborn essays was a study by Claude Summers on "Herrick's Political Poetry: The Strategies of his Art." The preceding year had also witnessed the first of two groundbreaking articles by Leah Marcus, "Herrick's *Noble Numbers* and the Politics of Playfulness," *ELR* 7 (1977); the second and in some ways more generative, "Herrick's *Hesperides* and the 'Proclamation made for May'", appeared the following year in *Studies in Philology*.

The story of the discovery of a political Herrick hardly constitutes headline news in a profession currently feasting on the subject of power ("Is there anyone left without a 'politics of' paper somewhere?" asks the guilty reviewer). But in the context of the consciously miniaturized world of *Hesperides* and in light of the lengthy, if sometimes fraught, history of associating Herrick almost exclusively with lyric, this shift in orientation is a major story. Implicit in it is the question about how we are to receive and transmit Herrick's achievement; or to put the issue at its most portentous, about how we might begin to redefine Herrick for another century of readers. Both books under review participate significantly in this inquiry.

For Leah Marcus, in *The Politics of Mirth*, Herrick remains essentially the canonical lyricist of old—in the double sense of that phrase. Most of the poems she discusses are among Herrick's best known, with "Corinna's going a Maying" serving in its familiar role as the centerpiece for analysis. Even her concern with festivity has a deeply familiar ring to it

since the topic continues Herrick's long association with rural poetry. And like Leavis, she is responsive to the lure of the lyricist; but in a move that elegantly and learnedly historicizes the problem, Marcus interprets as a subtle call to religious and political conformity what Leavis interpreted as an unsettling temptation for the reader. "To be sweetly sad, to be absorbed in the game, the 'solemn' rite," or to sense joyous festivity and imagine the dance—these remain fully appropriate responses to Herrick's verse; but in Marcus's version the poetry need not be interpreted as "negligible" if it can be positioned in the larger discursive context made, as it were, imminent by the Civil War itself and all that the Revolution has come to represent in signifying England's transition from a late feudal to an early modern culture. In a pointed recollection of much twentieth-century debate, Marcus deploys an Eliotic echo involving Marvell to displace a Leavisite Herrick in the 1979 article: "*Hesperides* stands as a work of considerable artistic merit, regardless of its political context. But without recognizing the poetry's place within that context, we will forever underestimate the tough reasonableness beneath Herrick's lyric grace" (p. 73).

Marcus's way into this history is through the now familiar route of the Book of Sports and the ensuing controversies it provoked between Puritans and ecclesiastical authorities—the two Stuart kings under whom it was twice promulgated, James (1618) and Charles (1633), and, of course, Archbishop Laud. That the Declaration, as it was originally called, was Royalist and regulatory goes without saying. Even George Wither, who is sometimes misrepresented by critics as anti-Monarchial and Puritan well before he became an officer in cromwell's army, could dedicate an emblem poem in 1635 to defending the cause of the Book of Sports against Sabbatarians. But until Marcus made the case for Herrick in 1979 and then subsequently for Jonson and Milton and to a lesser degree for later lyricists like Vaughan and Marvell, the "politics of mirth" had largely been the province of historians, most notably Christopher Hill. Part of the fascination with her book, then, lies in its attempt to cross boundaries and not simply to generate readings along traditional literary, thematic, or generic lines. We've long thought of Herrick as a Son of Ben and even (in his prayer to "Saint Ben") a co-religionist disdainful of precisians; but the case for their affiliation was generally seen as temperamental and poetic, not ideological—bound together through a controversial text bearing the royal seal.

In the seven years between the appearance of "Herrick's *Hesperides* and the 'Proclamation made for May'" and the chapter on the same

subject in *The Politics of Mirth* ("Churchmen Among the Maypoles"), Marcus has expanded upon her original argument and made some notable changes. The notion of a prevailing "economics of festival," with its slight Marxian twist, has now replaced the earlier, more or less oppositional view of Herrick reacting against a specifically defined enemy. Besides keeping her in the vanguard of New Historicists, the shift allows her to broaden and deepen the social implications of her criticism—always richly documented—to include more poems for discussion, and to see her way around the obvious problems of viewing Herrick as in any real sense a polemicist. "Corinna" is no longer made into "a seductive plea to dissidents to return to the green and pleasant fold of national unity" ("Proclamation," p. 73). (Even supposing that dissenters were reading *Hesperides*, it seems highly unlikely that this is the conclusion they would have drawn from the poem.) And problematic poems, like "*The Fairie Temple: or, Oberons Chappell*," which seems as much a mockery of high ritual as a defense, have been excised from the discussion.

By "economics of festival," Marcus means to designate a Royalist-Anglican semiotic underlying and informing Herrick's poetry, a semiotic, moreover, in which the old feudal ties of land and social hierarchy are vivified through Laud in a ritual of collectivizing magic and set against an emergent, Puritan individualism. If read with an ear to its liturgical echoes, a poem like "Corinna's going a Maying," can now be heard as voicing an Anglican "survivalist credo" at the same time it extends orthodox forms of worship and thereby also contains its own potential for hedonistic disruption. Whereas an earlier generation of critics celebrated Herrick's delight in disorder, for Marcus the fear of disorder initiates a desire for delight (and a no longer so innocent one at that) as well as motivates some of Herrick's famed wistfulness. Other poems, like "The Hock-cart," "The Wassaile," "The May-pole," and "To Meddowes" are scrupulously positioned in relation to this economy. Some, like "Corinna" and "The May-pole," are seen as sustaining orthodoxy; others, like Swinburne's favorite, the rarely anthologized "To Meddows," comment obliquely and elegiacally on the presumed rupture in the Royalist semiotic, almost as if, although Marcus does not push this equation, nature in this poem were a prodigal and foolish landlord (like the King) and now paying the price.

It is one of the special strengths of Marcus's criticism that we can now hear resonances in the poetry that were inaudible to an earlier generation, a feat no less valuable but in some ways more difficult to accomplish than excavating a previously neglected portion of an author's

(Two recent critics who have elaborated on Marcus's argument in interesting ways are Peter Stallybrass, "'Wee feaste in our Defense': Patrician Carnival in Early Modern England and Robert Herrick's *Hesperides*," *ELR* 16 [1986], 234-52, and Acshah Guibbory, "The Temple of *Hesperides* and Anglican-Puritan Controversy" in *"The Muses Common-Weale": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1988), pp. 135-47). Marcus's chapter has the further virtue of responding indirectly to the teacher's nightmare—the melancholic lament about having little to "say" about Herrick in the classroom. Transparency, it can easily be argued with *The Politics of Mirth* in hand, is never *transparency*. Within a Royalist-Laudian semiotic, even a flower that bows its head to the east, as happens in "Corinna," can have a substantial political thrust to it.

Critics of New Historicism often fault its practitioners for making the small, amber bead of an anecdote spell the large Cleopatra of culture. But the chapter on Herrick in *The Politics of Mirth* presents, I think, the opposite problem. For if it reminds readers of lyric that transparency is never transparency, it is equally possible for defenders of Herrick's lyric purity, now probably a minority in the academy (New Critical remnants no doubt), to hold the mirror up to Marcus and contend that the concern with a demystified reading of Herrick can be just as transparent, although for different reasons. Instead of reading and responding to Herrick's constantly changing lyrical signature in poem after poem, could it not be argued that there is a significant danger of discovering in the text only the letter L (for Laud) or, worse yet, some other, even more opprobrious, abbreviation for the Book of Sports? These problems, moreover, do not exactly disappear among some of her followers, as this remark by Stallybrass indicates: *Hesperides* is "a notable defense of Charles's policies. The carnivalesque itself is used by Herrick, as it was by the Jacobean and Caroline Government in the *Book of Sports*, to produce a mythic unity of prince, gentry and people which could be used as a weapon in a struggle *within* the governing classes" (p. 247).

I doubt whether these differences can ever be satisfactorily resolved since they evolve from two very different habits of reading. One begins, in effect, inside the lyric and works generally within its specified field of referents; the other proceeds, as it were, from the outside and introduces references that have been partially obscured or made altogether invisible either by the apparent simplicity of (in this case) Herrick's lyric voice

or by traditional literary approaches involving genre and source. But there are points in Marcus's account where this debate is particularly acute, where these two modes of reading and their *implied* politics are in evident conflict. (No less an authority than Stephen Greenblatt has promised on the flyleaf that "the political serves at once to clarify elusive texts and to intensify one's sense of the complexity of *literary* representations"—my italics.) What, for instance, does one make of the discussion of a slight poem like "The Wake" that never mentions that the poem begins as an invitation, "Come, Anthea let us two / Go to Feast, as others do"? Hardly a significant omission and perhaps easily reconciled with the general interpretation Marcus puts forward: that the poem is "subtly shaped to defend the parish wake against the charge that it provokes disorders" (p. 150). The only real problem here is that after one has already come to view Herrick as a disguised Laudian (in this case "Anthea" would presumably be accommodated as a semantic prop) and *Hesperides* as an elegant variation on the Book of Sports, there is really nothing very subtle about this defensive reading. So it becomes necessary to add a further level of sophistication if the poem is to be worth decoding from a materialist perspective. This is quickly accomplished by re-presenting Herrick himself as something of a cultural critic now wary of nascent capitalism creeping into village fetes, an interpretation apparently (Marcus says "indirectly") authorized by the key lines "Where the businesse is the sport." For her purposes, it would have been better if the line read "where sport is the businesse"—thus more directly challenging the primary meaning of "businesse" as denoting some general activity. It would have been better still — "indirection" completely aside—if one could be sure that in the mid-seventeenth century "business" carried the commercial sense now being assigned to it. We know it did by the early eighteenth century. (The *OED* cites the first recorded use in Defoe [1727].)

The desire to make Herrick into a sophisticated critic—in this case more anthropologist than economic historian—of "explanatory systems" instead of simply the old folklorist in rhyme is nowhere more apparent than in Marcus's discussion of "The Wassaile." (In so far as the poem serves as a generating example for her definition of an "economics of festival," the discussion is of further importance.) In the poem, the wassailers are represented as having come to an estate; they offer it some blessings in the hope of receiving beer and ale, but getting none, they

deliver a mild threat to the household Lars that contains vestiges of a curse:

> The time will come, when you'l be sad,
> And reckon this for fortune bad,
> T'ave lost the good ye might have had.

Hardly exceptional as verse, the poem might be read as a "To Penshurst" in reverse, a failed hospitality poem that concludes with a cautious engine against the absent almighty. The most interesting moment in the poem, as Marcus suggests, is the weirdly gothic characterization of the estate given by the wassailers once they recognize that the owners are not to answer their blessings with beer:

> Alas! we blesse, but see none here,
> That brings us either Ale or Beere;
> *In a drie-house all things are neere.*
>
> Let's leave a long time to wait,
> Where Rust and Cobwebs bind the gate;
> And all live here with *needy Fate.*
>
> Where Chimneys do for ever weepe,
> For want of warmth, and Stomachs keepe
> With noise, the servants eyes from sleep.

The description is vivid but no more realistic than earlier sections praising the potentially bountiful estate; but Marcus nonetheless seems to treat it as documentary evidence of an estate in decline. "Might [the owners] be absent in London: or have they simply lacked the means to keep up their decaying property?" she asks. These questions then lead to some speculations about the presumed "infallibility" of blessings by the wassailers and to what she sees as a fundamental breakdown in the logic of the poem, one that further validates Herrick's credentials as a cultural critic. Why should the wassailers end the poem by threatening a house already so evidently in decay? The answer she proposes is difficult, so I quote:

> This threat defies logic: if the estate already shows the effects of the failure of holiday reciprocity, how is it that such "fortune bad" will become evident only in the

> future? Herrick's deceptively simple poem portrays a collective mechanism for dealing with the breakdown of a system of communal obligations. According to some social historians, just such imprecation against those who refused to perform traditional almsdeeds could lead to accusations of witchcraft against the petitioners. But in the perception of the wassailers, the decay of the estate is instead the effect of festival "magic" repudiated. Offering hospitality would have undone the conditions that make hospitality seem impossible. The perceptual disjunctions in "The Wassaile" point to a sophisticated understanding on Herrick's part of the fallacies underlying such an explanatory system. (p. 143)

Leah Marcus is usually an acute critic and an exceptionally clear writer, but something has happened here. The simple explanation is that she has misread the poem: the imaginary boundaries of the lyric must occasionally be honored if they are to be successfully crossed. The cobwebs and weeping chimney do not denote the actual condition of the house any more than Marvell's Juliana has actually created a landscape of hamstrong frogs that no longer dance, although that is how the mower perceives and represents the situation. Like the mower, the wassailers refigure the landscape to designate the source of their rejection: the uncharitable disposition of the owners who, in contrast to the Sidney family, do not warrant identification. (Given the Christmas season, their niggardliness is the more unconscionable to the wassailers.) From this perspective, the ending, rather than defying logic, seeks to extend its initial claims by attempting to revalidate the efficacy of an earlier speech act. It seeks, in other words, to maintain a modestly magical view of language. As Marcus suggests, "The Wassail" does point to a breakdown in community; indeed, the poem is a rare instance in *The Hesperides* of Herrick viewing social hierarchy from the critical perspective of the poor and probably ought to be valued as such. In this respect, the difference between it and "The Hock-Cart" is remarkable. But Herrick hardly seems any further "outside" the "explanatory system" of festive magic here than he does at the end of *Hesperides* when he is busily constructing, with charms and enchantments, his late-Renaissance "pillar of Fame."

I would not want to suggest for a moment that this reading was unavailable to Marcus, but it does not accomplish what she wants to

accomplish: to present a Herrick who is somehow outside the culture he inhabits. For if Herrick cannot be seen in this more sophisticated light, the danger is not that her thesis doesn't "work" but that it works only too well. Once one has grasped the possibility of reading *Hesperides* as a Book of Sports, the problem is not with failing to make the case but where to draw the line, so that Herrick, once again, doesn't collapse in on himself, as Leavis feared was constantly the case.

Eager to dispense with New Historicism, some might interpret the strains in Marcus's argument as evidence, once again, of literature's inherently transcendental properties. Others tempted to view history as only another version of textuality have criticized her for still clinging to an older "reflectionist" theory of language. But wherever we might land in this larger debate—and there are problems with both formalist and deconstructionist critiques of historically based readings—Marcus's chapter on Herrick seems especially interesting precisely because, as Greenblatt suggests, her arguments allow us to witness with unusual clarity both the point of local intersection between politics and literature and the places where the literary text exists in a highly problematic relation to historical context. Paradoxically enough, the pressure of her historicizing argument requires that we respond not less but more attentively to Herrick's poetry than was often the case with earlier New Critical readings—even if, however, we rediscover continually the burden such simplicity imposes on the interpreter.

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Cultural clout is not, in any sense, part of Ann Coiro's agenda in her theoretically modest yet very substantial *Robert Herrick's "Hesperides" and the Epigram Book Tradition*. Coiro, too, wrestles with the problem of Herrick's purported triviality—Leavis is summoned at the outset; but whereas Marcus sought to invest the lyric with new significance by crossing it with adjacent political texts, Coiro attempts to give weight to Herrick's achievement by widening our view of the Hesperidean garden itself and of the generic terms in which it has usually been read. Epigram, however, is not simply rehabilitated as the forgotten genre. (It has, after all, never been entirely passed over, as the recent work by Alistair Fowler makes clear.) It is retrieved, rather, already coded with political valency, where, besides carrying its usual association with vinegar and gall, Coiro sees it functioning in significant counterpart to Herrick's lyric impulse. As she states: "The supreme accomplishment of *Hesperides* is its portrayal of the poet's mind; in this complex mix, the coarse epigrams are

Herrick's barely suppressed nightmares and self-doubts" (p. 169). For everything dainty, there is something grotesque; every swan produces an ugly duckling. One might think of her cure to the problem of Herrick's simplicity, then, as homeopathic. By applying the genre most associated with base trivia and proposing that the book be read in its entirety, she attempts to erase a sense of the trivial from *Hesperides*.

At the very least, Coiro's book allows us to reimagine, on an immediate level, the problem of historical transition that confronted a belated Elizabethan lyricist. Like Carew and Herbert, Herrick was born in the 1590s, but he outlived his immediate generation (by 1640 both Carew and Herbert were dead) and yet did not, could not, partake in the new imaginative energy released by the Civil War and the Interregnum that helped motivate the two best lyricists of the next generation, Marvell and Vaughan, both born in 1622. In this scheme (more mine than hers but the rest is not), Herrick becomes a kind of Arnoldian poet caught between two worlds, with *Hesperides* serving as "a significant statement about the role and predicament of the artist in a revolutionary society" (p. 26). If there is a disconcerting anachronism to this romantic image of Herrick as "the artist," he is still viewed as sufficiently of his times to make the finished 1648 text serve as a not-so-elegant commentary on historical circumstance. The fall of kings, Coiro argues, implicates the poet in his own fall and the fall of poetry itself. "Bone dry" is how his epigrams are characterized at one point in the brief discussion of *Noble Numbers*, and *Hesperides*—to shift metaphors again—as a text in which "liquefaction" slowly hardens because of political faction.

Coiro gives the underside of Marcus's "survivalist" Herrick. A fully loyal but finally not untroubled "Stuart" poet and in some respects an imperfect Laudian, he is gradually forced to reckon the failure of the lyrical vision of a "merrie England" associated with the Monarch and perpetuated especially in the masks. (An excellent opening chapter on the contemporary iconography attached to the myth of "Hesperides" neatly details this predicament.) And with this reckoning, it might be said, Herrick is able to discover the more distant reaches of the epigrammatic tradition and its associations with an activist, if not necessarily subversive, politics. When *Hesperides* is said to be the consummate example of a book of epigrams in English, this statement means something very specific to Coiro: that the epigram book as first produced by Martial and received by the early Renaissance already included a powerful lyricism (thanks to Martial's incorporation of Catullus); and that in the course of its history in sixteenth-century England, the genre acquired a

political dimension it never could have possessed in Martial, living under strict Roman censorship. It did so first in the Latin epigrams of More, who wrote epigrams of advice to several kings, then in the more popularizing mockery of Heywood's *Proverbs* and *Epigrams*, and finally and more pervasively in the 1590s when authorities sought to contain the outburst of satire and epigrams by having them banned. The mixture of lyricism, scurrility, and advice in *Hesperides*, then, might be said, on the one hand, to reach back through Jonson, who sought to elevate the genre in the literary hierarchy by proclaiming his *Epigrammes* his "ripest studies" but who also produced a much cleaner, more resolutely classicized, version of the genre. On the other hand, *pace* Annabel Patterson, Coiro offers *The Underwood* as "Saint Ben's" more enabling model. Less tidy and more pointed in its commentary on current events, it offers, too, a retrospective of a full career.

All of this—and I have had to condense in a few sentences a great deal of the author's research—is very suggestive literary history, made more valuable by the absence elsewhere of an authoritative treatment of the epigram in the English Renaissance. (A mordant footnote reminds us of the perils that have befallen the few who have attempted to map this prickly terrain.) These chapters then prepare the way for the more particular study of the generic strain between lyric and epigram in *Hesperides*: chapters that work dialectically in accounting for various kinds of juxtapositions in the volume—Martial versus Anacreon, with regard to principal sources; the requirements of patronage as against the needs of the poet; the conflict between lyric delicacy (art) and epigrammatic rawness (nature); poems of political praise questioned by sententious commonplaces; and finally life against death. In all of these chapters, Coiro is conscious of subtle shifts in the *Hesperides* as a whole, shifts that develop new contexts for understanding specific poems. If one were to interpret the motive behind the dialectical structure itself, moreover, the emphasis would have to fall on Coiro's desire to loosen, to expand upon, current critical categories that are often seen either as belittling Herrick's artistic accomplishments (Braden comes in for some surprisingly rough treatment) or codifying too neatly Herrick's Royalist politics (Stallybrass). And on almost every occasion Coiro proves herself an able opponent.

Tracking these dialectics, however, can produce some repetition in the critical argument. We are told more often than we need be of the chastening presence of epigram in *Hesperides*; Herrick can sometimes be made to sound more like the autocrat at the breakfast table than the

on-again, off-again swiller of sack, as phrases like "reality" and "sobriety" come to assume a privileged place in the discussion of any particular group of poems. And I found myself occasionally irritated by attempts to give poems a kind of statistical significance on the basis of their structural position in the volume. ("In the center" of the 1,130 poems in *Hesperides* tends to mean anywhere from 450 to 614, with the latter earning the right to be called "almost the precise mid-point.") But these quibbles ought to be seen in light of the larger interpretive venture, which is, if not to reverse the powerful historical preference for Herrick as a lyricist, then to contextualize it radically by unlocking large portions of *Hesperides* generally ignored by critics and anthologists. Coiro's study makes one keenly aware how thin is the strip of poems by which Herrick is usually known.

In this regard, the most important chapter, to my mind, has to do with the epigrams of advice. By excavating an almost universally ignored portion of the canon in relation to contemporary history, an act that implicitly carries forward arguments mounted earlier relating the genre to politics and one accomplished with respect for chronology as well as tactful sympathy for the complex and ironic fortunes of Royalists in Devon, Coiro persuasively asks us to rethink the nature of Herrick's loyalism. Not that Herrick was a closet Parliamentarian, but there are a number of poems, increasing in quantity near the end, that indicate he was not an unquestioning loyalist. (The tightrope walk with negatives in that sentence suggests not the meagerness of her argument, which is well researched, but the narrow corner into which Royalist clergy were backed by 1648; so, too, the purposefully gnomic quality of the epigrams—many are merely brief distichs—makes it difficult to contruct a positive statement about Herrick's politics.) Some epigrams, like "Counsell" ("'Twas Caesars saying: Kings no less Conquerors are / By their wise Counsell, then they be by Warre"), are plumbed for their ironic shadings. Others like "Obedience" and the memorably titled "Bad Princes pill their People," are seen as carefully qualifying earlier poems espousing Stuart ideals of divine right. And still others are viewed as flirting with constitutional issues or reporting common gossip about Royalist military foibles. More could have been made, I think, of their general inscrutability (some are as hard as a nut to crack); and it would be interesting to know whether the increasing turn to a pithy colloquialism bearing a political edge (see, "Beginning, difficult," "Strength to support Soveraignty," or "Plots not still prosperous") suggests another discursive register entering into *Hesperides*—that of Civil War journalism. Nonetheless, these bits and pieces, like Herrick's oddly apologetic poem to

political dimension it never could have possessed in Martial, living under strict Roman censorship. It did so first in the Latin epigrams of More, who wrote epigrams of advice to several kings, then in the more popularizing mockery of Heywood's *Proverbs* and *Epigrams*, and finally and more pervasively in the 1590s when authorities sought to contain the outburst of satire and epigrams by having them banned. The mixture of lyricism, scurrility, and advice in *Hesperides*, then, might be said, on the one hand, to reach back through Jonson, who sought to elevate the genre in the literary hierarchy by proclaiming his *Epigrammes* his "ripest studies" but who also produced a much cleaner, more resolutely classicized, version of the genre. On the other hand, *pace* Annabel Patterson, Coiro offers *The Underwood* as "Saint Ben's" more enabling model. Less tidy and more pointed in its commentary on current events, it offers, too, a retrospective of a full career.

All of this—and I have had to condense in a few sentences a great deal of the author's research—is very suggestive literary history, made more valuable by the absence elsewhere of an authoritative treatment of the epigram in the English Renaissance. (A mordant footnote reminds us of the perils that have befallen the few who have attempted to map this prickly terrain.) These chapters then prepare the way for the more particular study of the generic strain between lyric and epigram in *Hesperides*: chapters that work dialectically in accounting for various kinds of juxtapositions in the volume—Martial versus Anacreon, with regard to principal sources; the requirements of patronage as against the needs of the poet; the conflict between lyric delicacy (art) and epigrammatic rawness (nature); poems of political praise questioned by sententious commonplaces; and finally life against death. In all of these chapters, Coiro is conscious of subtle shifts in the *Hesperides* as a whole, shifts that develop new contexts for understanding specific poems. If one were to interpret the motive behind the dialectical structure itself, moreover, the emphasis would have to fall on Coiro's desire to loosen, to expand upon, current critical categories that are often seen either as belittling Herrick's artistic accomplishments (Braden comes in for some surprisingly rough treatment) or codifying too neatly Herrick's Royalist politics (Stallybrass). And on almost every occasion Coiro proves herself an able opponent.

Tracking these dialectics, however, can produce some repetition in the critical argument. We are told more often than we need be of the chastening presence of epigram in *Hesperides*; Herrick can sometimes be made to sound more like the autocrat at the breakfast table than the

on-again, off-again swiller of sack, as phrases like "reality" and "sobriety" come to assume a privileged place in the discussion of any particular group of poems. And I found myself occasionally irritated by attempts to give poems a kind of statistical significance on the basis of their structural position in the volume. ("In the center" of the 1,130 poems in *Hesperides* tends to mean anywhere from 450 to 614, with the latter earning the right to be called "almost the precise mid-point.") But these quibbles ought to be seen in light of the larger interpretive venture, which is, if not to reverse the powerful historical preference for Herrick as a lyricist, then to contextualize it radically by unlocking large portions of *Hesperides* generally ignored by critics and anthologists. Coiro's study makes one keenly aware how thin is the strip of poems by which Herrick is usually known.

In this regard, the most important chapter, to my mind, has to do with the epigrams of advice. By excavating an almost universally ignored portion of the canon in relation to contemporary history, an act that implicitly carries forward arguments mounted earlier relating the genre to politics and one accomplished with respect for chronology as well as tactful sympathy for the complex and ironic fortunes of Royalists in Devon, Coiro persuasively asks us to rethink the nature of Herrick's loyalism. Not that Herrick was a closet Parliamentarian, but there are a number of poems, increasing in quantity near the end, that indicate he was not an unquestioning loyalist. (The tightrope walk with negatives in that sentence suggests not the meagerness of her argument, which is well researched, but the narrow corner into which Royalist clergy were backed by 1648; so, too, the purposefully gnomic quality of the epigrams—many are merely brief distichs—makes it difficult to contruct a positive statement about Herrick's politics.) Some epigrams, like "Counsell" ("'Twas Caesars saying: Kings no less Conquerors are / By their wise Counsell, then they be by Warre"), are plumbed for their ironic shadings. Others like "Obedience" and the memorably titled "Bad Princes pill their People," are seen as carefully qualifying earlier poems espousing Stuart ideals of divine right. And still others are viewed as flirting with constitutional issues or reporting common gossip about Royalist military foibles. More could have been made, I think, of their general inscrutability (some are as hard as a nut to crack); and it would be interesting to know whether the increasing turn to a pithy colloquialism bearing a political edge (see, "Beginning, difficult," "Strength to support Soveraignty," or "Plots not still prosperous") suggests another discursive register entering into *Hesperides*—that of Civil War journalism. Nonetheless, these bits and pieces, like Herrick's oddly apologetic poem to

Laud's rival, enemy, and victim, John Williams ("Upon the Bishop of Lincolne's Imprisonment"), serve as evidence to support the view that even if the poet was not a significant political thinker or controversialist, his politics are a little looser and more complicated than current criticism usually allows. Here, as elsewhere, Coiro is very good at bringing out potential strains in the volume, strains that make *Hesperides* a little messy but more interesting for being so.

Like *The Politics of Mirth, Robert Herrick's "Hesperides" and The Epigram Book Tradition* quests after a deep reading of the poet. Although the search for tough reasonableness beneath lyric grace has been abandoned, the Herrick prized and presented in these pages is still a distinctly modernist one: complex, ironic, self-critical. "Yoked opposites" (p. 123) is the familiar metaphor used to describe the tensions seen as underlying the collection as a whole; "read unto the end," *Hesperides* might be said to acquire a sense of "continuous purpose" that Eliot found unavailable on a lyric by lyric basis. It is also clear that at the heart of Coiro's argument with Braden is a version of the modernist's quarrel with the late nineteenth-century aesthete, a debate about favoring substance over surface, depth over decor, the work as a unified whole against the poem as an elegant or inelegant shard. Today's critics are usually modernist in this respect, even if wearing post-modernist dress; density of argument has the day. But there are moments in *Robert Herrick's "Hesperides"* when the poet is simply not up to fulfilling the larger role expected of him, when the spectre of simplicity haunts the desire for a deeper reading, as happens when the temptation to regard the tension in *Hesperides* between lyric and epigram is viewed as finally bringing "into question the ontological status of beauty itself" (p. 163). Can this reading possibly coincide with poems like "How Violets came blew"?

Another instance of this kind of interpretive implosion, more interesting because it points to the peculiar paradox Herrick's poems present to modern readers, involves an extended discussion of some poems scattered throughout *Hesperides* to Herrick's friend and patron, Sir Clipsby Crew and his family. Generically, they are unexceptional—an epithalamium, a hymn, an ode, and an epitaph; individually they are modest performances. In order to give them some heft and density, Coiro urges us to see that "the poems to the Crewes are arranged so that we must be conscious of what Herrick is doing on several levels at once" (p. 144), and she makes the good point that this group forms "a story." (The notion of "sequence" loses some urgency when the meaning of "several" is stretched to cover a distance of some twenty-five poems.) But the

story the poems tell, while no longer the strictly charming one of old since Herrick is seen as openly demanding wine and food for his services, is still nothing if not ordinary, as Eliot remarked of Herrick more generally. The question then is whether Herrick is actually doing something on "several levels at once" or whether he is being ordinary in a different sort of way than has been usually reckoned—whether, as James Merrill writes in "Lost in Translation," we have "a pattern complex in appearance only."

That suspicion need not be a disabling one; Merrill's syntax shows him neatly hedging his bets in a way that Herrick might have admired. But it raises the crucial question of what it means to read this vast collection "unto the end"—Herrick, we know, would have us drunk and be well fed—and how to report on this activity without betraying either the complexity of the reading process or the work as a "book" assembled by the poet. Reading sequentially or dialectically has the distinct advantage of isolating specific themes and responding to the ironies of juxtaposition. But one wonders—and I choose this word deliberately—whether we have yet an adequate critical vocabulary for talking about so vast a collection of poems: a kind of "wonderkammer" of verse in which, as Stephen Mullaney has suggested in another context, "strange things, gross terms, curious customs" (*Representations*, 3 [1983]) are set out on display in a rehearsal of cultures in the late Renaissance, as if on holiday: wassailers and household Lars, Oberon, Julia in many settings and individual parts (teeth, legs, hair), the poet "himself" constantly refracted through the volume, proverbs, charms, the odd tomb, Herrick's friends and family, even the king—all more or less carefully presented, like "Tradescant's curious shels" (H-668), though obeying no readily perceived system of order.

Wonder cabinets have always made advancers of learning nervous. Bacon called them "frivolous impostures for pleasure and strangeness" and even so enthusiastic a pursuer of oddities as Sir Thomas Browne felt the need to give the many curious artifacts in his "hesperidean" *Garden of Cyrus* (1658) a Neoplatonic frame. It is no surprise, then, that Herrick, too, should continue to make scholars both curious and nervous on this score, for the work itself reflects the changing notion of the idea of a collection in the seventeenth century—one no longer strictly bookish in the Jonsonian sense but, as gentleman virtuosi like John Evelyn were emphasizing, a place for collectibles, for rarities of many kinds to be gathered and admired, in which the primary, although not necessarily sole, response was to surface. If Herrick can be interpreted as the culmination of the epigram book tradition dating back to Martial, he also

assembled his poems in the historical space between Tradescant and Ashmole—when the trivial was being perceived as no longer negligible even if it had yet to acquire the status of a potentially significant artifact. *Robert Herrick's "Hesperides" and the Epigram Book Tradition* does not pursue this latter line of argument, but in opening the door all the way on *Hesperides*, Ann Coiro has raised, more forcefully than any of Herrick's previous critics, the question of what it is we are invited to see.

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