

Kathleen Lynch. *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century Anglophone World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii+321 pp. \$99.00. Review by MARION A. WELLS, MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE.

Protestant Autobiography contributes in a number of important ways to current themes in early modern scholarship. By exploring the social and political contexts of the devotional autobiographical narratives she selects from the politically turbulent years of the seventeenth century Lynch offers an intricately historicized account of the “self” constructed in and through such writings. Lynch’s work engages with the ongoing exploration of self and subjectivity in early modern studies, as well as with more recent local explorations of the kinds of life-writing (especially devotional life-writing) that are hard to categorize within traditional genres. In addition, *Protestant Autobiography* emphasizes the extension of the developments in spiritual autobiography throughout the Atlantic Anglophone world; the book touches down in Bermuda, England, Ireland, and the colonies in North America, deftly weaving together developments in each location and highlighting the complex parallels among them. One of the most interesting issues that the book scrutinizes is the epistemological status of experience. As Lynch puts it in her introduction: “The spiritual experience was a narrated apprehension of an ontological state: I am saved” (28). The book surveys the contested uses of such spiritual experiences, arguing that because “experience is not a historically stable entity” it is necessary to attend closely to the particular cultural circumstances that make certain kinds of experiences validating and authentic (174). It is precisely the range and depth of Lynch’s historical sources that bring this challenging project to life in her book.

Chapter One introduces the vexed history of the reception of Augustine’s *Confessions* in the context of the polemics of conversion in 1620s England. The textual history of the translation of this text in English makes for a fascinating lens through which to read the clash between Protestant and Catholic claims to religious authority, and Lynch artfully draws attention to the ways in which the truth claims of Augustine’s text became politically contestable during this period. The inclusion of a study of John Donne against Augustine’s redactors in this chapter works especially well, given Donne’s own

conflicted relationship with the politics of conversion. Lynch considers two different kinds of conversions (from one church to another, and from life to death) in her reading of Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* (1609) and *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) and the depth of her contextual material gives these somewhat familiar texts a newly complicated resonance. In chapter Two Lynch juxtaposes two very different iconic figures: King Charles, whose *Eikon Basilike* establishes in exemplary form the political and social function of personal testimonies of belief; and Sarah Wight, "an empty nothing creature" (74) whose nonconformist text *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* (1674) used personal testimony from a very different platform. Lynch's discussion of Sarah Wight's spiritual authority necessarily engages with an exploration of the role of gender in the generation of personal testimony. The mutual imbrication of narrative, gender, and spiritual authority opens up some fascinating questions, which Lynch begins to address in her discussion of Wight's "embodiment of passive, patient receptivity throughout a time of spiritual trials" (85). As in Chapter Three, where Lynch also includes a discussion of the role of particular women writers, including most prominently the Baptist writer Jane Turner, a more sustained analysis of the role of gender in Lynch's chosen texts would perhaps have been helpful, if only to draw out in more a systematic way the connections between body, self, and narrative that the women writers help to complicate within Lynch's own text. At the same time, the decision to focus in Chapter Three on a particular year—1653—as what Lynch calls "a temporal micro-study" of the religious writing produced in a variety of contexts, including the Irish and North American ones, provides a fascinating cross-section of the genre of spiritual autobiography, and illustrates her central contention about the historical and cultural instability of spiritual experience as a validating principle brilliantly clearly. Chapter Four turns to the exemplary narrative of John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), famously written from prison. The discussion of Bunyan allows Lynch to return powerfully to the epistemological questions about experience and knowledge that frame her book. She sees in his narrative a tension between the absolute power of God, and the "human agency that comes . . . from the obsessive examination of scriptures in a bid to understand the dictates of the divine" (183). As

Lynch emphasizes, Bunyan's epistemological uncertainty leads him to the radical and all but unthinkable question: "what if his belief were all a 'think-so too?'" (183). Lynch usefully complicates her exploration of Bunyan's narrative by placing it in the context of other personal narratives emerging from the Bedford congregation, including what Lynch sees as the normative narrative model of John Gifford, the church's first pastor, and the interestingly different experiential narrative of Agnes Beaumont, a member of Bunyan's congregation whose own narrative was influenced by a reading of his. In her discussion of the various accusations leveled at Beaumont (licentiousness, parricide), Lynch acknowledges that her experience "exposed the limits of radical religion's accommodation of women's experience" (215). The point is well taken, and Lynch makes it convincingly, but as with the earlier discussions of women's narrative a stronger theoretical system for explicating the gendering of religious experience and authority would give this aspect of the book greater power.

One of the strengths of this book is its meticulous attention to the details not only of the writing process but of the printing and circulation of texts as well. Lynch discusses in detail the involvement of printers and booksellers in the dissemination of material (especially important when the material is controversial), rightly considering the political and social implications of the changing structure of the printing world. Using this lens she is able to make more visible the work of less well-known figures (like Matthew Simmons, who printed Milton's *Areopagitica*) in constructing particular seminal works. "Can we not think of Simmons as also committed to the project in a principled way?" (272), she writes. This shift in focus is tremendously useful for thinking about the material, cultural, and political conditions in which texts get published in this period. The focus on the construction of the book itself as an artifact returns as a strong theme in the final, fifth chapter, in which Lynch analyzes the complex, evolving narrative by Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (published posthumously in 1696). In a fascinating study of textual and ontological instability Lynch shows how Baxter's "conception of the self was organic and evolving, enmeshed in the circumstances of its political, social, and ecclesiastical world" (148). These conditions are perfectly demonstrated by this posthumous work, which, as Lynch

points out, was given its title by editors, is missing its first eighteen pages, and refuses both linearity in its structure and a final ending. As Lynch shows, this fluid and palimpsestic work captures in its structure Baxter's view of the self as a work in progress; there is an intriguingly postmodern feel to his avoidance of decisive markers in his text as in his life: "Yet whether sincere Conversion began now, or before, or after, I was never able to this day to know" (269).

In summary, then, *Protestant Autobiography* is a meticulously researched, deeply learned study of an intriguing set of devotional narratives set against their particular historical contexts. It will be of great interest to historians and literary scholars alike in its attention to the mutual imbrication of historical event and personal narrative; since it explores in fascinating ways the intersection of self, narrative, and experience it also contributes to philosophically oriented inquiries about the nature of experience. Finally, the study attends in illuminating detail to the history of the book, providing this reader at least with a wealth of hitherto invisible information about the textual and publication history of a diverse selection of texts.

Gillian Wright. *Producing Women's Poetry, 1600-1730: Text and Paratext, Manuscript and Print*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. x + 274 pp. + 5 illus. \$99.00. Review by JULIE D. CAMPBELL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY.

In this useful study, Wright focuses on five English poets, Anne Southwell, Anne Bradstreet, Katherine Philips, Anne Finch, and Mary Monck, thus covering figures from the seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries. Dedicating a chapter to each of these women, Wright contextualizes their lives, discusses pertinent manuscript and print practices, and provides detailed close readings of their poetry.

Although she incorporates biographical and paratextual information into her analyses, Wright argues that the scholarship of the 1990s with its focus on canon expansion and modes of writing, as well as more recent scholarship emphasizing the material and paratextual aspects of women's writing, should be less intently pursued; she instead