

Terry G. Sherwood. *The Self in Early Modern Literature: For the Common Good*. Duquesne University Press, 2007. viii + 384pp. \$60.00. Review by CHRISTOPHER BAKER, Armstrong Atlantic State University

Postmodern definitions of English Renaissance subjectivity seem to take as their watchword Iago's infamous remark, "I am not what I am." Jonathan Dollimore, Stephen Greenblatt and others have urged that literary portrayals of early modern personality renders the self as decentered, fragmented, or otherwise so fluidly conceived as to negate any possibility of ascertaining a fixed or continuing identity. Terry Sherwood takes issue with this view in his new essay, a decidedly historical approach which views the cultural context for Renaissance identity as grounded in the concept of vocation or calling. He traces this basis for identity through Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, and Milton.

Pagan and Christian authorities (Cicero and Erasmus) sanctioned a vision of a volitional self able to choose how to be of best use to God and man, a vision markedly different from presentist images of the self as a fluctuating ground of contending ideological forces. Sherwood notes the assumption of such an intentional identity in the works of Sir Philip Sidney, the political commentaries of Thomas Smith and Robert Crowley, and the Calvinist William Perkins. As early as Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), obedience to authority, a key element in the crafting of identity, posed thorny questions of allegiance and behavior, questions generating dramatic complexity for figures such as Shakespeare's King Lear, who becomes tragic "because he no longer accepts his vocational responsibility to his own kingdom although his subjects continue to do so" (40). Lear suffers because of his unwise rejection of a "sense of duty to the common good," a sense expounded by contemporary authors and contrary to the modern belief that "a centrifugal, radical decentering is a necessary condition of the early modern self" (49).

As an extended discussion of how to "fashion a gentleman or noble person," Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* explores the varieties of good and bad service to God and queen, depicting a panoply of selves whose moral distinctions collectively posit an ideal "person." The epic assumes "that a full person includes a physical presence identified by

expressed intentions, or alternatively, intents or intendments” (62). Sherwood identifies Britomart as the poet’s “most engaging hero” (64), not least because she also confirms that a dedicated self is not an exclusively male prerogative. The epic’s frequent examples of moral and immoral behavior reflect the emphasis upon virtuous discipline found in such contemporary works as Thomas Elyot’s *Boke Named the Governour* (1531); Spenser clearly expresses “the intermingled assumptions of humanist civic responsibility and Protestant vocation” (94). Here, as elsewhere, Sherwood is especially effective at reconstructing through primary texts the context of Elizabethan thinking which informed the English “person.”

Whereas Spenser explored the varieties of good and bad vocations through a variety of allegorical figures, Shakespeare’s *Henriad* compresses multiple possible selves into Hal’s process of maturation to kingship. While new historicist critics see him as a self-consciously maneuvering and Machiavellian prince, Sherwood finds Hal navigating the principle of multiple calls to vocation outlined by Luther and William Perkins and thus the interlinked selves of the monarch: prince, son, royal “actor” or personage, moral agent. One wishes Sherwood had dwelled longer on the implications of Hal’s act one “reformation” speech, which displays such a canny sense of purpose that his sense of self seems to need no further elaboration; nevertheless, his various identities, Sherwood tartly notes, render Hal “complex, not incoherent.” (125). The tavern scene coalesces many of these contending roles as the prince confronts Falstaff in a necessary testing which helps him establish his “fitness” for office.

Much more than for Prince Hal, John Donne’s vocational path was a painful and “Jobian” experience of reversal and privation. Sherwood dwells on the emotional strains of Donne’s personal and professional life prior to ordination, and the result is a portrayal of one who struggled to meet his own needs before he could fulfill the model of service outlined in earlier chapters. Donne’s radical neediness makes this chapter more problematic as we confront the poet’s “psychology of loss, separation, and depression” (152). Sherwood plausibly responds to allegations of Donne’s misogyny by stressing the androgynous nature of his poetic speakers and his intimately complex link to the divine/human feminine self which is the subject

of the *Anniversary* poems. Less obvious is how this deep responsiveness to the feminine (contributing to a marriage which sabotaged his political opportunities), coupled with an epistolary self which sought “sociability, friendship, and amorousness” (169), defined, rather than motivated, his final religious calling. Sherwood’s close analysis of Donne’s varied “intersubjectivity” (168) details an emotional fragmentation which ironically suggests the decentered identity he is otherwise arguing against. However, we are on surer ground after Donne’s entrance to holy orders, for which his successful model was a Pauline sense of vocation.

Turning to Ben Jonson, Sherwood traces the poet’s consistent devotion to truth as an apprehendable reality through the *Forest*, *Epicœne*, *Sejanus*, *Poetaster*, and in his friendships with like-minded advocates of humanist learning such as John Selden, William Camden, and Robert Cotton. Borrowing Thomas Greene’s emphasis on the important “centering” images in Jonson’s drama, Sherwood sees Jonson as both centered on a core of truth-values yet always seeking a greater “roundness” in an expanding circle of acquaintances. These friendships with persons of influence were essential to his career growth and have led to accusations of social climbing which are not without some truth of their own. Yet Sherwood emphasizes that Jonson was more selective in his closest relationships to power than has been recognized, favoring those with high ideals and public-mindedness such as William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Lucy, Countess of Bedford. His defense of Jonson as a champion of familiar humanist ideals covers predictable ground, but Sherwood carefully rebuts the negative image of the poet as simply a status-seeker by teasing out the core values he praised in others and—in the case of his competitor Shakespeare—envied himself.

Unlike Shakespeare, Milton invested himself in every aspect of his canon, so that we are ever aware of an authorial presence whether direct or implied. His “centered Protestant self engaged in a holy war” (258) is most visible in his combative *A Second Defence* and *A Defence of Himself against Alexander More*. Less overt are his defensive strategies in *Lycidas*, while *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* “embody Milton’s maturest interpretation of the defensive pattern that framed his own vocational experience” (294). Samson and Christ become

complex reflections of the poet's own embattled self during the wars of truth. Sherwood's postscript argues that Francis Bacon's public service reflects his family's sense of vocation, especially the formative influence of his mother Anne. However, Bacon's infamous trial for graft is noticed only in passing and its implications for the book's thesis deserve fuller comment.

Sherwood's argument, both broad and deep, surveys an important theme in the careers of six notable Elizabethans. It deserves a place alongside its new historicist contenders as a rejoinder to be reckoned with.

Peter Mitchell. *"The Purple Island" and Anatomy in Early Seventeenth-Century Literature, Philosophy, and Theology*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 718 pp. + 14 illus. \$99.50. Review by WILLIAM E. ENGEL, UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH, SEWANEE.

James Joyce, obviously familiar with the scope and tenor of Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island*, included but later struck an extended allusion to it in the manuscript version of *Ulysses*. Overall the poem has not fared well among its modern critics. For example in his anthology of *Later Renaissance Nondramatic Verse and Prose*, Herschel Baker, perhaps as a benevolent gesture, included twenty-two stanzas of "the notorious *Purple Island*," but with the caveat that Fletcher "exhaustively and implausibly expounds human physiology with a blend of Spenserian pastoralism and relentless allegory." Frank S. Kastor's conclusion that it is "an unmistakable disaster" gives some indication of why it long has been considered a post-Spenserian curiosity worth knowing about but perhaps not worth reading.

It was just such universal opprobrium that made me eager to read it as a graduate student spurred on, no doubt, by what Poe called "the imp of the perverse." With only a gut-feeling to go on, I was convinced there had to be more to the poem than I was seeing but simply had not yet acquired the critical acumen to find it. At last though, Fletcher has been vindicated in full by Peter Mitchell, who has published the best critical account of the poem to date. Indeed, he has written what may well be the last book ever needed on *The Purple Island*.