

Anne Cotterill. *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004. viii + 431 pp. \$173.00. Review by MARK MCDAYTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO.

It may seem odd to express surprise, in a review written for a publication entitled *The Seventeenth-Century News*, at the appearance of a book that successfully bridges the great divide of 1660, and treats the seventeenth century as a coherent whole. Yet, it is still relatively rare to find an author who can treat Donne and Dryden with equal authority and sensitivity to historical nuance. Anne Cotterill proves herself one such in her study, *Digressive Voices in Early Modern Literature*, a book that succeeds brilliantly at finding connections where others have more frequently seen only discontinuities.

Cotterill's book deals, in fact, with no less than five seventeenth-century authors, in all of whom she finds an interesting commonality: John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Browne, John Milton, and John Dryden all at some point "found themselves in weakened and powerless or dangerously ambiguous social and political positions" (5) that necessitated a shift in rhetoric. Their response, in each case, was to turn to digression, a mode that Cotterill identifies with feminine figures "who through associations with death, melancholy, or sacrifice, receive and absorb the poet's fears of weakness and marginality" (14).

Cotterill's interest in the connections between rhetoric and psychology are evident in this last suggestion: her authors' digressions enable "an exploration of hidden and unruly or disturbing parts of the speaker's self" (2), while suggesting "an 'inner self' that inhabits the perspective of the weak and marginal" (27). Closely associated with this insight is her identification of digression with the Ovidian figure of the "labyrinth," which is here less a place of entrapment and confusion than an opportunity for indirection and subtle subversion, "a winding trail scattered with intellectual riches" (12).

Cotterill begins her close readings with a focus upon patronage, which looms large in her discussions of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden, all of whom found themselves to some degree undermined and feminized by, or resentful of their patrons. Chapter 1 treats the digressive elements of Donne's *Anniversaries* (1612) in the light of the poet's attempts to secure literary patronage. In this context, the deceased Elizabeth Drury becomes "a fit vehicle for absorbing, reversing, and transforming feelings of vulnerability, unfulfilled

promise, and transcendent visionary capacities into a marketable self” (60). In Chapter 2, which may be the most impressive in this book, the literal and figurative mazes of Marvell’s Nun Appleton become a means of obliquely expressing disappointment at his patron Thomas Fairfax’s self-emasculatation: Fairfax’s retreat into the world of his country estate in the face of a nation needing his services becomes personal for Marvell, “the failure of a male guardian” (121). Cotterill very neatly ties together the political and personal through the figure of the “drowned man,” identified here as “an image for chaotic dissolution, whether of the self or the state” (101).

Cotterill concludes her exploration of patronage in Chapters 5 and 6, examining two late texts by Dryden which employ digression to shift “the meaning of being on the ‘inside’—from the world of court and government to the fluid home and interiors of a mind become infinitely expansive” (217). Her discussion of *The Hind and the Panther* (1687) argues that Dryden employs digression as a means of evading direct polemical statement and responsibility, while the labyrinthine course of the debate that he chronicles circumambulates the disappointing space at the centre of the poem vacated by his patron and king, James II. In her treatment of Dryden’s *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693) Cotterill sees a neglected and, since the Glorious Revolution, thoroughly disenfranchised Dryden employing a rhetorical maze of indirection to critique his patron and supporter of the new political regime, the Earl of Dorset.

Sandwiched between these discussions of digression and patronage are readings of Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* (1658) and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667;1674). Chapter 3 deals with Browne’s text within the context of Royalist defeat and Interregnum politics: this focus, and Browne’s use of the image of the garden, tie this chapter very nicely to the preceding one on Marvell. In Browne’s “quincunx” the geometric diamond figure with interconnected points, and “lattice,” Cotterill sees another version of the labyrinth, and a means of subtly critiquing the linear and simplistic narratives imposed upon nature and religion by the “Puritans.” Chapter 4, on Eve’s fateful rejection of “Grateful Digressions” in *Paradise Lost*, seems admittedly somewhat out of place in this volume given the shift in focus away from the author; Cotterill argues, however, that “Eve becomes Milton’s instrument for the transformation, domestication, of sensuous beauty, and not least language, into an interior space of reflection” (199). Eve’s abandonment of digression

in favor of the reductive rhetoric of Satan is redeemed through that fall, when she transforms “guilt” into an “interior space of understanding and will” (211).

Cotterill concludes with an “Epilogue” that argues that, for Jonathan Swift and the eighteenth century, digression becomes unavailable as a generative rhetorical strategy, becoming instead, in works like *A Tale of a Tub*, a figure of madness, “the modern voice of permanent dislocation and dis-possession” (304). While one might cavil that Cotterill’s depiction of eighteenth-century attitudes towards digression is a little overstated (the feminized figure of the obsessively digressive Tristram Shandy surely bear a close resemblance to her own authors), her overall conclusion is well-conceived and convincing.

Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature is an accomplished study and a most entertaining read. Cotterill’s identification of digression in these diverse texts as a coherent rhetorical strategy operating at both the conscious and unconscious levels is enormously useful and suggestive. Her discussions of these texts are most worthwhile and explore aspects of works like *Upon Appleton House* from a perspective that is refreshingly new. It is a work that will, it is hoped, encourage and engender future studies seeking to similarly refocus our understanding of seventeenth-century writing.

Elizabeth Sauer. *Paper-Contestations’ and Textual Communities in England, 1640-1675*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. vii + 199 pp. \$50.00.
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In this rewarding study, Elizabeth Sauer proposes that the mid-seventeenth century theatrical mode migrated into print, especially with the closing of the theaters in 1642, and that it generated divergent and conflicting “textual communities,” i.e., networks of writers and readers informed by a sense of audience and performance, even to the point that readers were addressed or constructed as de facto jurors. Sauer particularly focuses on trials and spectacles of punishment, which were the primary social dramas of seventeenth-century England, and for which she considers a wide variety of texts, including trial accounts, religious tracts, female-authored defenses, petitions,