

Alison Shell. *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiv + 244 pp. \$95.00. Review by ROBERT LANDRUM, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA BEAUFORT.

In *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* Alison Shell assigns herself an ambitious task, to assess the impact of post-Reformation Catholicism on England's oral culture. It is an investigation of a persecuted and deliberately opaque subculture through the use of notoriously shifting and obscure sources, made all the more difficult by the demands of a divided audience. Herself a reader in Literature at the University of Durham, Shell's book is crafted to appeal not just to her literary colleagues, but also to early modern historians, brought to the topic by renewed interest in Catholic survivalism. Given these challenges of readership and topic, *Oral Culture* is a successful book. Shell's archival work is impressive, her use of sources is imaginative and revealing, and her conclusions will be useful to scholars in multiple disciplines.

*Oral Culture* begins with the sacrilege narratives that emerged from the Henrician Reformation, showing how the spoiled abbeys and "bare ruined choirs" inspired a folk and print tradition of reverence for the old faith even among adherents of the new. The book then progresses in separate chapters through spells and other folklore, and competing Protestant and Catholic martyr traditions, citing survivals to the present. Most impressive is the discussion of controversial literature, whereby print-based Protestants contended against orally-based Catholics to buttress the faith of believers and sway the uncommitted.

Among the accomplishments of this book the most impressive may be the breadth of Shell's sources. She convincingly demonstrates how orally transmitted works can be derived from the dark corners of the documentary past. Among these are ballads and sung verse, libels and martyr-tales, ghost stories and sacrilege narratives, all circulated orally before being brought to print by conservative antiquarians like John Aubrey, who valued them as evidence of a vanishing English past. This pursuit of non-canonical sources necessarily requires non-canonical research in a host of archives. The latter are revealed by a close inspection of the notes because, unfortunately, the book lacks a formal bibliography.

Shell's command of the sources is commendable, as is her firm determination to consider those sources in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She explicitly aligns herself with the new historicists (though never claiming membership among them) and profits from the work of a constellation of named historians. She repeatedly refuses to adopt a single theoretical foundation, and is openly critical of "a grim period when practitioners of sub-Foucauldian body-scholarship tried their best to dehumanize the martyrs of the Reformation" (114). Though scholars of literature might object, this reticence is appropriate, since the style, means, content and format of the sources is determined by their very specific English and confessional and chronological contexts

One of the assumptions of Protestant pamphleteers and modern readers is that oral tradition can be equated with illiterate tradition. Shell demonstrates that this is not the case. Oral culture spanned socioeconomic gaps, and was not restricted to the ignorant or the poor. The tradition aimed for a "wide audience which included the unlettered" but was not limited to them (86). The resort to oral transmission was often a conscious choice of medium, based on its advantages. Shell urges caution, however, warning that oral literature does not represent an "unproblematic access to the popular voice" so much as an elite attempt to "popularize dissident ideas" (19, 82). If, as is commonly assumed, Protestants adopted print culture as their own, oral culture remained a contested no-man's-land, one where Catholics had significant advantages. Protestant pamphlets, for example, could be answered in ballads, which would themselves be answered in manuscript, which would be contested through libels.

The promise of this largely successful book is compromised, however, as it approaches a conclusion. After a Tridentine defense of oral tradition as opposed to written records, Shell concedes the problematic nature of her sources, composed by one voice and transmitted by others until frozen in their ongoing evolution in the act of written publication. Her response is to prescribe appropriate care in the use of orality, but also to challenge the significance of factuality. "Truth" she says, "is not necessarily absent ... if one broadens one's definition of it into considerations of diversity and emotional authenticity: an area where minority groups, Catholics and

others, have special demands on a compassionate reader's attention" (150). This is a generous sentiment, one that might appeal to those for whom the text in the present is more important than the time it illuminates, but it will undoubtedly make some historians wince. She then summons the same post-structuralists whom she denigrates in the introduction to call into question the veracity of written evidence. In the end she accepts the inherent limits of oral tradition with an unsatisfying literary truism: "questions of truth are not the same as questions of accuracy" (151).

Shell's conclusions, after the unconvincing challenge to factual certainty, are reasonable and modest. "Orally transmissible material" she says, can legitimately be used as "a rich source of views held about Catholicism in early modern England, and as a key means of Catholic self-definition." This is followed by the equally unobjectionable: "oral traditions were a crucial means of preserving Catholic matter in post-Reformation England" (169). More than this, Catholic oral traditions illuminate the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century struggle of faiths in a way that the purely written record does not. The presence of a vigorous Catholic oral culture argues, as do several of Shell's cited historians, for the vigor and vitality of the faith, even as official repression intensified. For this contribution, and for the sources she has brought into the light and into the scholarly conversation, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* is an important and largely successful book.

Elena Levy-Navarro, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 238 pp. \$80.00. Review by GARY KUCHAR, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA.

Elena Levy-Navarro's *The Culture of Obesity* deploys the insights and strategies of queer and feminist theory in order to narrate a history of the fat body from the late Middle Ages to the present. The aim of the book is avowedly activist: Levy-Navarro intends her history "to intervene in our historical moment by viewing this moment through the early modern period" (1-2). The ultimate goal of this