

Jacob Blevins. *Humanism and Classical Crisis: Anxiety, Intertexts and the Miltonic Memory*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2014. ix + 172pp. \$62.95. Review by ADAM SWANN, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW.

Any new book on the relationship between Renaissance writers and the classical world is entering an already crowded field, but Jacob Blevins is right to note that the “psychic conflict between humanists and their rediscovery and literary representation of Rome” (31) has not yet been explored. Blevins finds the epicentre of the titular “classical crisis” in the material, textual, and ideological ruins of Rome, which was a “Rome that in one sense had to be recovered and restored, but ultimately replaced” (31).

He opens *Humanism and Classical Crisis* with the arresting contention that “the act of literary appropriation of classical texts and culture during the early modern period ... is primarily the result of a psychical process of identity construction and only secondarily a matter of historical literary development” (1). Blevins uses the term “psychical” rather than “psychological” throughout the book to sidestep the latter word’s associations with the clinical practice, and the psychoanalytical angle of his approach is evident in his claim that “one must approach intertextuality as fundamentally part of a psychical process, and any given text a kind of amalgamation of psychical influence” (1).

Blevins’s psychoanalytical approach, of course, is indebted to Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, and Blevins recognises that “Bloom’s ideas regarding the psychical origins of literary creation are the foundation of the current study” (3). Nevertheless, “one of the most obvious shortcomings in Harold Bloom’s theory of influence is that the key concept, ‘anxiety’, is never systematically or analytically dealt with” (14), and this shortcoming is ably and amply remedied in *Humanism and Classical Crisis*.

In a first chapter remarkable for its concision and lucidity, Blevins delineates his understanding of Lacan’s three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. But this theoretical framework is not established in order to launch a Lacanian critique of Bloom; rather, Blevins intends only to “use Lacan as a supplement to realise more fully the implications of Bloom ... for Renaissance humanism” (25).

Chapter Two begins with a discussion of the Pléiade, and Blevins's analysis of du Bellay's *Les Antiquitez de Rome* yields a number of interesting tidbits that would have warranted more extended investigation. The subsequent section on Jonson and Shakespeare's Roman plays is more satisfying. Starting from the solid, if not exactly revolutionary, observation that these plays involve "an ideological struggle between a past Rome and a changing present Rome" (45), Blevins goes on to tease out the psychical ramifications of this assertion. In *Catiline* and *Julius Caesar* "all the characters struggle to come to terms with a vision of Rome that is idealised but not *realised*" (51), and this unresolved tension renders these plays archetypal embodiments of the humanist psychical anxiety regarding Rome.

Chapter Three's analysis of Marvell's twin poems, "Hortus" and "The Garden," provides a neat microcosm of the book as a whole. Blevins rightly identifies Marvell's classicism as "representative of humanism's pre-enlightenment culmination of literary expression" (67). Considered in isolation, "Hortus" contains "absolutely nothing English ... nothing Christian, nothing that identifies or creates a seventeenth-century literary voice" (69); yet "The Garden" is more than just a straightforward imitation of its Latin counterpart. Blevins deftly unpicks the subtle differences between the two poems, showing how the "primary goal" in "The Garden" "seems to be to redefine and ultimately reassess the valorization of the classical in the Latin version" (70). By inserting Christian Neoplatonic considerations of beauty into "The Garden," Marvell, Blevins maintains, ruptures the classical unity of the original with a Christian anachronism. This strategy was a favourite of Marvell's friend Milton, so it is naturally to him that Blevins turns next.

Chapter Four starts from the observation that the Milton scholarship of the last few decades has moved away from persistently eliding the differences in Milton's corpus, and now attempts "to show that ambiguity, doubt, paradox, and irreconcilable ideological splits are at the heart of Milton's work" (86). For Blevins, the humanist anxiety regarding literary tradition is most pronounced in Milton, whose "dialogue with past literature becomes an integral part of his self-construction as a poet ... and his *Christian* ideological construction is constantly at odds with that" (88). Blevins makes astute selections

from across Milton's canon, ranging from "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" to *Samson Agonistes*. Milton's nativity ode is shaped by the conflict between classical and Christian, and Blevins finds the poem not only representing the classical past, but "explicitly and deliberately attack[ing it] ... and it is only through that attack that he is able to situate himself as a poet of the present" (105). But Blevins resists the critical tendency to judge the nativity ode as a success because it successfully elevates Christ above paganism or as a failure because its structure remains resolutely classical. Instead, he argues that the poem does not succeed or fail on such terms, because in all its vacillation and uncertainty it in fact embodies "the humanist *process*; this process is how literary identity is constructed" (106).

Blevins ably develops his discussion of Milton's relationship with the classical world in Chapter Five, which focuses on the representation of the heroic in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Both works invoke classical forms—epic in *Paradise Lost* and tragedy in *Samson*—but these "initial identification[s] with the classical past ... will soon be usurped and challenged by [Milton's] poetic projection" (132). While Blevins adds little new to prior critical discussions of Satan's role as a hero, he argues that *Samson*, although avoiding "direct comparison with classical heroes," nevertheless depicts the eponymous character as a hero and "represents a mode of heroism that can be both classical and Christian simultaneously" (143).

Milton's classicism is "not a seamless blending of his past and present, but rather an active, anxious attempt at finding a balance" between classical tradition and Christian ideology (145), and in this he is emblematic of the other writers discussed in this book. Blevins is at his most persuasive when he rejects the fallacy of seamless literary influence and instead draws our attention to the joins in the fabric. *Humanism and Classical Crisis* therefore offers an incisive and insightful investigation of the anxieties of early modern intertextuality, and is a compelling portrait of humanists worrying at the edges.