

Thus, *“With Wandering Steps: Generative Ambiguity in Milton’s Poetics”* provides the reader with a fine clutch of essays on topics of interest to all Milton scholars. It’s a pity that Duquesne University Press, the press that sponsored these essays, is no more.

Alison V. Scott. *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015. 246 pp. \$112.00. Review by EMILIE M. BRINKMAN, PURDUE UNIVERSITY.

Intellectual histories of the idea of luxury have been, traditionally, progressive in nature, as narratives that chronicle the concept’s upward evolution from “classical vice or medieval sin to modern social benefit, and finally to its apotheosis as a marker of distinction in postmodern, capitalist society” (1). Scholars have generally agreed that the key moment within such progressive histories lies in the eighteenth century, wherein luxury was “demoralized” as a result of intense political and economic debates. Alison V. Scott’s recent work *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England* complicates this traditional narrative with her examination of the “cultural lexicon” of luxury during the seventeenth century, an era often overlooked by intellectual historians but which she identifies as highly significant within luxury’s modern conceptual reformulation.

Scott’s work builds on the historiographical foundations laid by Christopher Berry’s *The Idea of Luxury* (2004) and Linda Levy Peck’s absolutely superb *Consuming Splendor* (2005), for the former focuses solely upon the idea of luxury within the eighteenth century while the latter reveals how the rise of luxury consumption truly originated in the seventeenth century, a century before what was previously supposed. Thus, this book fills a much-needed historiographical gap as Scott explores the shifting meanings of luxury at a time of rapid commercial and economic development throughout England, with the growth of global trade and increase in the consumption of expensive and superfluous goods. Early English uses of the term “luxury” tended “to invoke particular processes by which moral, social, and political order was corrupted” as opposed to the category of indispensable commercial goods or services that dominate our world today (4). In

Middle English, the term “luxurie” specifically denoted the carnal sin of lust. Yet, it is with the rise of material luxury culture during the seventeenth century that this medieval concept of “luxury” began to be altered or adapted.

Indeed, Scott’s central argument is that before the eighteenth century, ideas concerning luxury were not static but rather fluid, dynamic, complex, and often contradictory, encompassing a plethora of different meanings and associations that expanded beyond the moral and religious implications of luxury as merely lust or sexual licentiousness. Scott reveals that contemporary literary works and mimetic texts “revived and then extended the concept’s more expansive associations,” by conflating classical *luxuria*, “a vice of misgovernment in which the feminine passions and bodily desires overwhelmed masculine reason and mental control,” with English “luxurie” (i.e. lust) to ultimately produce a more encompassing idea of luxury with a larger and more vibrant, albeit often confused, conceptual vocabulary (4). Furthermore, Scott’s work demonstrates how luxury was being negotiated not simply in moral or religious terms but also in a political sense, as the idea was often defined in terms of “riot, excess, indulgence, rankness, revelry and dissipation, and its disordering effects were applied to diverse situations including mockery of wealth, ill rule, and sedition” (7). Scott’s study here aims to, and ultimately succeeds in, revealing the “discontinuities in the history of the idea (both over time, and across the ‘languages’ of this period) that have previously been overlooked” by intellectual historians (10).

Heavily influenced by Quentin Skinner, Scott utilizes both intellectual- and cultural-historical methods as well as a lexicographical approach in her exploration of seventeenth-century literature, which she maintains “provides the most complete account of a concept’s historical meanings and their shifts over time” (10). The book is organized thematically into three sections, each containing two chapters, that emphasize the idea of luxury as it manifested within three different linguistic frameworks of early modern culture: moral, material, and political-economic. The first part investigates the tensions and contradictions that certain uses of the term and idea of “luxury” might negotiate within the classical and early Christian traditions. Consequently, each chapter focuses upon an important figure of early

modern luxury that embodies the moral threat of the idea, although in different manners. The first chapter explores how luxury is represented as a fluid and evolving concept within Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, specifically with Acrasia and the bower of bliss episode in book two. Scott finds that the meaning of luxury is "neither simple moral vice nor transcendental sensory experience," for the idea is understood in terms of both Roman self-indulgence and Christian lust, as well as "a simultaneous failure of Aristotelian moderation and stoic self-containment" (26).

The second chapter is truly, in the opinion of this historian, the crown jewel of Scott's work with its interesting examination of Cleopatra and her myth of luxury within early modern culture. While drawing other contemporary works into her analysis, Scott utilizes Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as a case study in order to demonstrate the inadequacies of defining luxury strictly within moral-religious terms and to further reveal the larger political dimensions of the idea in relation to the early modern literary "Cleopatra." The bard's classic tragedy of the Roman hero and the legendary Egyptian queen has traditionally been interpreted as a cautionary tale, warning Englishmen and women of the dangers associated with eastern decadence, female excess, misrule, and disorder against Rome's masculine political virtues. Yet, Scott argues that, aesthetically, Cleopatra also embodies a positive Hellenistic conception of luxury as pleasure, beauty, and bounty (not excess, as represented with the symbol of the cornucopia). The author concludes that the idea of luxury that Cleopatra represents within early modern terms, is therefore "hybrid and complex, and certainly far from simply interchangeable with lust or concupiscence" (82).

The book's second section moves beyond these representations of luxury as a moral threat and rather concerns the materialization of luxury within early modern literature, focusing on the ways in which the developing consumer culture of seventeenth-century London affected or altered the moralized idea of luxury as unnatural excess. Chapter three reveals a fascinating view into the early Stuart urban marketplace with its analysis of several satirical works, most notably those penned by Nashe, Donne, Jonson, and Marston. Within such satires, the city of London is depicted as both the seducer of men

to self-indulge in newfound riches and the seduced, a metropolis transformed and victimized by luxury. By the turn of the seventeenth century, luxury was understood to mean more than simply lust or lechery but “an excessive appetite for commercial goods,” and as Scott so convincingly argues, urban literature “negotiated luxury as both [these] things at once, and always in relation to the processes of profusion, softening, transformation and delusion that characterize classical *luxuria*” (101). Scott’s fourth chapter extends this discussion of luxury consumption into the theater and further complicates the meaning of “luxury” as it considers Jonson’s comedies, including *The Alchemist* and *Volpone*, as well as Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*.

The third and final part of Scott’s book expands the examination of material objects and practices found in the previous section to investigate the development of “luxury” as an economic and political concept within seventeenth-century culture. The fifth chapter concentrates on *The Entertainment at Britain’s Burse* by Jonson, utilizing this masque as another case study for understanding the interplay of early economic debates and the praise (and invariably skepticism) of material luxury and royal magnificence found within civil entertainment. Here, Scott demonstrates how trade in luxury goods, namely fashion, was reappraised and recognized as potentially beneficial to the state-body. The book’s sixth chapter continues on with the theme of luxury and its relation to the body politic, a motif emphasized in the preceding segment, with its analysis of early modern Roman tragedies, specifically Jonson’s *Catiline* and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. In her examination of *Coriolanus*, Scott indicates how luxury was understood as a socially acceptable form of waste, which serves as a final nod to the first chapter’s discussion of excess, indulgence, and waste in *The Faerie Queene*.

The book ends rather abruptly with the final chapter’s discussion of *Coriolanus* and therefore lacks any sort of conclusion, which is my only significant criticism of Scott’s otherwise very fine and extensive study. A brief, concluding chapter that summarized the book’s central arguments and points would have better resolved the complex issues commendably raised and discussed in the preceding pages. Scott’s decision to not structure her book chronologically—for she contends, and successfully demonstrates, that the history of the idea of luxury was

not progressive—was undoubtedly the most effective organizational option. However, it may have aided the reader's contextual understanding, and actually strengthened her arguments further for that matter, if there was a bit more attention (perhaps in a conclusion) to the eighteenth-century political and economic debates of luxury that remain so central to the historiography of this idea.

Additionally, Scott's book purposefully excludes an investigation of primary sources relating to, as she so aptly states, "the business of everyday life," namely household account books, foreign papers and correspondence, diaries, and moral guidebooks, although she does often draw from sermons, pamphlets, and dictionaries (9). The inclusion of more such documents would have certainly expanded the book's discussions further, yet this was clearly not the author's aim and Scott's use of literature as her sole evidence has resulted in a profoundly exhaustive examination of the rhetorical negotiations of seventeenth-century luxury. Thus, this observation is less a criticism and more a note regarding a very promising opportunity for future studies, particularly in regards to the different and complex ways in which luxury was materialized within early modern English culture.

Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England is indeed an exceptionally rich study—wonderfully written, meticulously detailed, and utterly thought provoking. Scott's fresh and fascinating work here certainly maintains greater implications for the intellectual history of the idea of luxury within Western thought as well as the importance and usefulness of a lexicographical approach to the study of early modern literature. Yet, Alison Scott's book also maintains particular significance and relevance to our modern reality, for luxury continues to play an integral role in shaping and redefining our material world.