

Anne L. Birberick, ed. *Perfection. Studies in Early Modern France*. Volume 12. Charlottesville, VA: Rockwood Press, 2008. xv + 217 pp. \$40.00. Review by MICHAEL MEERE, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

What is perfection? Is it attainable? Is it even desirable? How does perfection, both flawlessness and completeness, play out in early modern French literature and thought? How did writers (and their readers) come to terms with its elusiveness? Anne L. Birberick's admirably edited collection on *Perfection*, the twelfth volume in the *Studies in Early Modern France* series, is comprised of a patchwork of ten interesting and diverse studies that grapple with this complex notion in sixteenth- and (mostly) seventeenth-century France.

In her brief introduction (five pages including the Work Cited), Birberick announces the four-part structure of the interdisciplinary volume. In the first section, which deals with perfection in socio-political contexts, Cloé Hogg's opening essay "Useful Wounds" offers a rich panorama of the fascination, use, and implications of the wound in sources ranging from Sévigné's letters, the *Mercurie galant*, and the medical manual *L'Ecole du chirurgien* (1687). Louise Frappier carefully analyzes the discursive strategies the Jesuits employed to depict Marie de Medici's and Louis XIII's royal entrances into Avignon in 1600 and 1622, respectively. In "Productive Perfection: The Trope of the River in Early Modern Political Writing," Katherine Ibbett suggests that the river stands as an ambivalent trope for the poetic figure of perfection on the one hand, and the flexible politics of reason of state on the other. Rivers can be torrential or peaceful, spectacular or prosaic, and Ibbett argues that understanding (the manipulation of) this flux elucidates the underpinnings of absolutist politics.

In the second section, focusing on problems of identity and self-(im)perfection, Daniel Maher's "Corrompre la perfection—de la Carte de Tendre aux Royaumes d'Amour," examines the variations and distortions of Madeleine de Scudéry's sentimental map in works by the abbé d'Aubignac (*Royaume de Coquetterie*, 1654), Tristan l'Hermite ("Le Royaume d'Amour," ?1654), and Paul Tallement (*Voyages à l'Île d'Amour*, 1663 and 1664). Birberick places Maher's essay in the second section, as she claims that it deals with the "parfait amant" (xiii); however, its emphasis is rather on the utopia-dystopia *topoi*

as they relate to cartography, narrative, and parody. Twyla Meding painstakingly analyzes Charles Perrault's rewriting (1694) of Boccaccio's Griseldis story in the light of the pastoral genre to argue that Perrault re-dresses the heroine *à la française*, not to imitate d'Urfé's *habit de berger*, but to create a "glaring anachronism in the topsy-turvy world of Parisian society," as he manipulates and modifies his Italian model and French pastoral to toy "with notions of gender and submission," "revers[ing] the imbalances inherent in pastoral, only to make his rectification always already obsolete" (82). In "(Im) Perfecting the Self: Montaigne's Pedagogical Ideal," Zahi Zalloua argues that Montaigne goes against the grain of ancient and humanist thinkers, including Aristotle, Seneca, Erasmus, Guillaume Budé and Etienne de La Boétie, on intellectual, moral, and aesthetic grounds, to promote a cultivation of imperfection of the self and philosophy, mirrored in the very structure of the essay form. Montaigne, writes Zalloua, "seems to announce a new way of doing philosophy, a new ideal of *imperfectio hominis*" (122-23). This is a clear and concise essay as well as a riveting piece of scholarship that astutely pinpoints an essential element (and problem) of both the *Essais* and Renaissance Humanism as a whole. Returning to the seventeenth century, Karolyn Waterson's tripartite study of La Bruyère's *Caractères* highlights "les traits d'exemplarité dispersés à l'intérieur" of the work to argue that most of the "modèles exemplaires," paradoxically defined in fact as "contre-modèles de figures marquantes du Grand Siècle, convergent vers un modèle intemporel et universel qui pourrait, dans l'idéal, les subsumer tous," (129). Waterson's meticulous study contributes to the existing abundance of critical work on exemplarity in the seventeenth century.

The third part of the volume addresses aesthetic perfection in two of Corneille's relatively lesser-studied tragedies, *Sophonisbe* (1663) and *Œdipe* (1659). Judd D. Hubert points out the former tragedy's unique theatrical system, for, unlike the protagonists of *Othon*, *Pulchérie*, and *Suréna*, Sophonisbe attempts but fails to find perfection (i.e. plenitude) with a partner; as a result, the eponymous heroine "must seek fulfillment on her own while preserving and even flaunting her integrity and her superiority" (157). With a series of perspicacious close readings and references to Corneille's *œuvre*, Hubert effortlessly demonstrates

how Sophonisbe attains (amoral) perfection: by committing suicide, “she becomes completely self-possessed,” rendering even her rival, Eryxe, “her greatest admirer” (167). In “Corneille and Tragic Perfection,” Helen L. Harrison chooses to analyze the playwright’s rewriting of Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, which Aristotle held as the perfect tragic subject. Corneille’s challenge was precisely to please a seventeenth-century French audience with a subject that, in most contemporaneous accounts, was unpleasant. And the stakes were high. Indeed, Harrison argues, in erudite fashion, that after Corneille’s humiliating flop *Pertharite* (1652), retirement from the theater and subsequent attempt at a comeback in 1659, “*Œdipe* represents [Corneille’s] effort to reinscribe himself in the struggle for tragic perfection and to position himself in respect to his ancient and modern rivals” (168). While both essays on Corneille are excellent, more variety in the realm of theater would have benefited this section; the editor may have included other essays on Corneille’s earlier plays and/or his contemporaries (e.g. Georges de Scudéry, Jean Rotrou, Jean Racine), comedy (e.g. Molière), or opera (e.g. Philippe Quinault).

Erec Koch’s essay “Perfect Pitch” stands alone in the fourth and final section on “art and science” (xiv); specifically, Koch examines scientific and rhetorical discourses on sound, proposing that the two disciplines were intricately linked in seventeenth-century France. By magisterially analyzing Marin Mersenne’s *Harmonie universelle* (1636-37), Géraud de Cordemoy’s *Discours physique de la parole* (1668), Charles Perrault’s *Essais de Physique* (1680), and Bernard de Lamy’s *La Rhétorique, ou l’art de parler* (1675; 1712), Koch argues that Mersenne prepared the groundwork on the mechanical science of sound that rhetorical treatises eventually adopted to “develop a consequent shift from the consideration of representational modalities of vocal expression, or orality, to the determination of the material effects of sound in audition, or aurality” (185). As a result, “voice no longer imitates passion as its expressive and projected representation,” posits Koch, “but instead functions as sound, a material phenomenon that produces affective responses by the physics of cause and effects” (185). Koch’s essay is very enlightening and fills a critical gap on the relations between passions and rhetoric, for scholars tend to privilege figures to the detriment of voice.

The volume is rather well put together, with a useful index that helps navigate such heterogeneous material. Birberick does admit that “each section, in many ways, may be viewed a discrete unit,” yet still hopes that “the essays of one section enter into dialogue with those of the others, creating thematic leitmotifs that give shape and focus to the volume as a whole” (xii). Its diversity within loosely defined categories is one of its main assets.

The articles are all quite good; nonetheless, this reviewer found the volume a bit lopsided. It is unfortunate that Zalloua’s essay should be the only one that deals with the sixteenth century in a series devoted to early modern France—and not one article is devoted to the eighteenth century. That Koch’s essay is not accompanied by an article on optics and the burgeoning revolutions in the science of vision, for example, is also regrettable, for it would have resulted in a more balanced final section. Finally, the volume is also heavily literary; yet with such a rich and complex theme, it may have been advantageous had the editor included some more disciplines, notably art history or musicology. Overall, though, *Perfection* is an accessible volume that speaks well of the health of seventeenth-century French studies, in which there is something for any seventeenth-century French student and specialist.

Hannah Dawson. *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy*. (Ideas in Context Series) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 361 pp. \$90.00. Review by KARIN SUSAN FESTER, UNIVERSITY OF WALES.

Hannah Dawson’s book is an impressive work about John Locke’s philosophy of language, in particular his critique of words, making it a valuable contribution to the field of seventeenth century studies and philosophy. The book is eloquent in style and rigorous and enduring in its presentation. Dawson makes extensive use of Locke’s original manuscripts, as well as engaging with works from various English, French and other European philosophers. The book is an excellent reference text for those requiring a specialist treatment of seventeenth century philosophy of language, especially where it concerns the development of moral language in political philosophical thought during Locke’s time.