

tions of the relevance of Milton's republication of *Of Education* and the linkage of the 1653 Psalm translations to the process of epic composition, to its exploration of restricted and extended meanings of the trope of education in the Milton canon. If earlier work on this trope had been episodic and overly narrow, Festa's claims are appropriately inclusive and integrative, allowing for an appreciation of the paradigmatic importance of education to Milton's hermeneutic.

Gavin Alexander. *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney 1586-1640*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xlv + 380 pp. \$120.00. Review by ROBERT E. STILLMAN, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE.

The importance of Gavin Alexander's *Writing After Sidney* is belied by the understated character of its title. For a figure whose significance has so frequently been misunderstood as residing more in the life than in the works, more in the mythology of Protestant martyrdom than in the reality of poetic production, Alexander's focus on the "literary" response to Philip Sidney is as wonderfully assertive as it is critically indispensable. Such an argument is indispensable because it recuperates brilliantly the fact of Sidney's domination over the literary culture of the 1590s as critic, as prose writer, and particularly as lyric poet, and the pervasiveness of his influence on the generation of English fiction makers that followed. Alexander's real interest lies not "in the broad outlines of [a] developing tradition"—as S. K. Heninger's does, by contrast, in his elevation of Sidney over Spenser as Elizabethan England's premiere exponent of the new poetry—but instead, "in its local details" because what fascinates him is the imitation that requires "some personal relation to animate it, even at one remove"—a kind of response that could last only a generation (337). With extraordinary erudition, an impressive command of the manuscript tradition, densely packed and rhetorically informed readings, Alexander attends to those "local details" of the literary dialogue that Sidney's texts sponsored with family and friends, with his sister Mary Sidney, his brother Robert Sidney, his friend Fulke Greville, and his niece Mary Wroth, and at one remove from that inner circle, to the complexly intertwined network of elegaic poets, sonneteers, prose romancers—extending from Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton, Gervase Markham and William Alexander, to Ben

Jonson and George Herbert—who in various ways for various motives entered into that dialectic of writing and response. As we “hear again a dialogue begun by Sidney,” Alexander persuasively argues, “[w]e are taught how to read him” (338). No one writing about Sidney in the last two decades teaches that lesson better.

The analytic center of Alexander’s argument belongs to a rhetorical term: aposiopesis, the figure of leaving unfinished what you have started, since Sidney’s literary afterlife is determined both by an “intense interest in his death, and in the incomplete nature of his works” (36). The incompleteness of the texts—posthumously published, mostly unfinished, and radically innovative—compelled response, and Alexander argues that these facts, together with what he calls “the extraordinary openness of the texts” themselves, their dialectical inventiveness and conscious avoidance of closure, are what “enabled their completion to be so elegant” (337). Alexander’s first chapter on “Dialogue and Incompletion” treats aposiopesis in the Sidney canon generally, and identifies it as an especially vital figure within the revised *Aradia*, whose status as “incompletion . . . looks forward to the interpretation it necessitates” (47). That treatment, in turn, sets the table for many of the meatiest, most satisfying chapters to come: including, Alexander’s sharp study of Mary Sidney’s literary efforts, as skilled translator and zealous guardian of her dead brother’s fame, to have what the title calls “The Last Word” about Philip Sidney; and including, too, Alexander’s penetrating examination of that poet of “mental confusion and darkness,” Fulke Greville, the most brilliant of all the Sidney circle writers, to whom “[o]ur perception of Sidney as a dealer in paradoxes and polarities . . . owes everything” (261); and includes, also, Alexander’s sympathetic, finely tuned response to Mary Wroth’s “dizzingly syncretic, endless, constant” fictionalizing of subjectivity in the self-consciously incomplete, unfinished and unfinishable two-part (as if one were not enough) *Urania* (331). When *Writing After Sidney* turns to various versions of the *Aradia*—texts that “do not achieve much for themselves, and do not want to”—unsurprisingly (and against chronology) the climactic portion of the chapter is reserved for William Alexander’s bridge-text composed for the 1593 *Aradia*, since it is there that he can illustrate best the sophistication of Sidney’s best contemporaries in adapting the aposiopesis of the first maker to fictive constructs of their own.

In the literary responses of the Sidney circle, incompleteness—as Alexander

notes—sometimes achieves the status of “intentional action,” almost “as if Sidney meant not to finish the *Anadula*, or intended to die before his time” (36). Aposiopesis is itself open, by means of such logic, to idiosyncratic deployment, a swerve of the critical arrow from the scope of targeted reading. Alexander is not the sort of scholar who swerves much—or often—but that does not mean that his analysis is free from challenge. There can be no question about the dialectical character of Sidney’s texts, about his willingness to entertain contraries to every proposition, to put into play a vast plenitude of possibilities—from the poetic to the political to the perverse—but one need not be a Mary Sidney, arbiter of the last word, to wonder whether Sidney’s startling openness to interpretation and dialectical complexity are less a function of his commitment to a Gadamer-style phenomenology (much less a pre-Bakhtinian heteroglossia), than a measure of his cosmopolitanism, his studied invention of an art with scope—the freedom to range both playfully and purposefully amidst a zodiac of ideas. Paradoxes and polarities do not automatically signal texts “riven by contradictions” or post-modern anxiety (261); as fiction-spawning fish, such figures sometimes swim—surely Greville thought so—in literary oceans whose capaciousness is enabled by something so fundamental and so elusive as faith. Alexander’s is clearly a study conceived before the comparatively recent “religious turn” (Arthur Marotti’s phrase) in early modern scholarship, and more attention to the issue of piety as it impacts Sidney’s poetry and poetics might have enriched this study of his literary afterlife. Even that “might,” however, threatens excess. Gavin Alexander’s *Writing After Sidney* is so startlingly successful, so obviously among the best books of its generation about Philip Sidney and the Sidney circle that to ask more from it risks sharpening some serpent’s tooth of ingratitude. This is a book that every scholar of English Renaissance literature should read. It matters for understanding the writer, the circle, the culture, and for the reminder that literary scholarship can be a pleasure at once to contemplate and to relish.