What, I think, is of greatest value in Davies's single-minded argument is his illumination of Bunyan’s own single-mindedness. Bunyan, the powerful exhorter, winsome devotional writer, expert evangelist, is in sharp focus in this presentation. I would add, though, to use some of Bunyan’s words which Davies cites, that in all these roles he relies upon apt imagery so that a reader might see “a whole heaven . . . intimated, where it is not at all expressed” (79).


This book is the last in the series of published essays compiled from the biennial meetings of the Renaissance Conference at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The indefatigable editors are to be congratulated for the quality of all twelve volumes which have made such strong contributions to the vitality of Renaissance, especially Jacobean, literary studies. The present essays are noteworthy for the ways in which they refract overlapping critical concerns. For this reason, Robert Evans’s opening article is a fitting “manifesto” for the collection. “‘What is Truth?’: Defining and Defending Theoretical Pluralism” is his irenic call for a greater tolerance of differing critical methodologies. It is also a vigorous, though not strident, rebuttal of Ellen Rooney’s _Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory_ (1989). She posits an audience holding irreconcilable views which criticism must undertake to persuade; Evans counters by theorizing that pluralism assumes as equally valid differing constructions of author and text, such that “any answers elicited can only be partial ones, not absolutely or completely final” (17). His proposal is lucidly attractive, not least for displaying a critical humility sometimes lacking among postmodern practitioners. His response to Rooney illustrates the thesis of Dennis Flynn’s “Conjecture in the Writing of Donne’s Biography, with a Modest Proposal.” Flynn takes issue
with R. C. Bald’s reliance on Wotton’s account of Donne’s supposed overmastering ambition. Bald’s eagerness to offer as irrefutable this debatable assumption inhibits the process of fruitful scholarly debate. Flynn’s alternative, similar to Evans’s pluralism, favors provocative conjectures (such, presumably, as Rooney’s) which lead to sounder conclusions, such as views proffered by such Donne scholars as Augustus Jessopp, John Carey, and Paul Sellin which “invite and even prompt refutation” (60).

Two other essays spotlight Donne. Joan Faust questions whether the literary debate over Donne’s frank eroticism is evidence of a deeper fault line concerning social attitudes towards sexuality. Reviewing classical and Renaissance attitudes towards coitus and the threat of venereal disease, she finds him displaying a fearlessness by poetically considering intercourse, yet paradoxically showing “an apprehension of carnal love” (186) in his poetic distancing from the act. Focusing on Donne’s sermon theology, Jeffrey Johnson argues that his few references to the Socinian heresy nevertheless reveal doctrinal fissures among Catholic and Protestant denominations. Though Donne condemns the Socinian denial of the trinity as heretical, he combines a Protestant respect for scriptural authority with a counter-Protestant reluctance to rely too heavily on reasoned analysis in doing so.

Milton attracts a predictable emphasis in this anthology. In the view of Tobias Gregory, William Empson’s view of Paradise Lost merits more attention as provocative conjecture. “In Defense of Empson: A Reassessment of Milton’s God” is Gregory’s attempt to justify Empson’s ways to readers, to defend him as an exemplar of “ethically engaged criticism” (74). For Empson, Milton’s God has much to answer for and deserves moral scrutiny. Rather than continuing to stress Fish’s exegetical approach (to expound the work without judging it ethically), Gregory urges a re-examination of Empson’s interpretive approach, judging the work morally though not in a narrowly topical, issue-driven way. Elizabeth Sauer, while somewhat overstating her case, expands upon Milton’s condemnation of his contemporary theatre in his preface to Samson
Agonistes by setting that closet drama in the cultural context of readers such as Pepys, and of Dryden’s borrowing from it in Aureng-Zebe and All for Love. Reading Comus through the lens of feminist theory, William Shullenberger proposes that “chastity in the Maske is the gender crossroad where Milton discovers his prophetic voice [which] activates and authorizes, rather than appropriates and suppresses, a public speaking site for libratory female speech” (204). The Lady’s empowered role is sufficient to render her “a Puritan way of anticipating Cixous’s ‘vatic bisexuality’” (225).

Shullenberger’s concern with feminist values is taken up in essays by Sharon Cadmon Seelig and Cristina Malcolmson. Seelig approvingly reviews the growing role over the past two generations of Renaissance women authors within the canon, while Malcolmson interestingly combines analyses of Robert Boyle’s Royal Society research on skin color with Margaret Cavendish’s utopian fiction The Blazing World which satirically implies “that English scientists are specimens even more curious than the New World populations they like to study” (200).

Postmodernism has also made for controversies within the discipline. Catherine Gimelli Martin’s essay (“The Ahistoricism of the New Historicism”) takes issue with “Frankfortian-Foucauldian assumptions” (39) that Bacon’s scientific utopianism marks a break with the Renaissance worldview informed by religion and magic. By heralding Bacon as champion of a scientific, secularized Enlightenment, this approach misreads the relations between early modern science and monarchy. Contrary to the new historicists, Bacon believed “not that knowledge is power but that properly constituted knowledge can provide a crucial tool of power” (31); Martin perceptively argues against the “formal circularity and inherent ahistoricity of this new-historicist critique” (43). Dan Jaeckle takes a more accepting view of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, finding it useful for grasping the dual voices in Marvell’s “Mower against Gardens,” a “promeadows ideology” contending with the “horticultural improvement of nature” (63). Though the mower argues that the horticulturist has debased the garden,
Marvell simultaneously holds up the mower’s language for ironic scrutiny, subtly distancing himself from the mower’s persona. Jaeckel’s reading delineates the poem’s contrasting tones, yet the Bakhtinian relationship between them could be explicated more precisely.

Two essays mark the interplay of religion and literature during this period. Noting that the sermon was “the preeminent literary genre in earlier seventeenth-century England” (140), P. G. Stanwood offers a survey of the historiography of sermon studies, calling for further research into the ways in which “the rhetorical tradition” (146) affected this literary form. Fault lines can also stem from difficulties in defining colliding forces, as Kate Narveson demonstrates in attempting to understand the nature of seventeenth-century religious experience. She urges that we must confront the emotional affect of genuine religious conviction while recalling that we can only respond “to the way theological discourses of the period provided the terms in which the experience was understood” (129). Taken all in all, this collection demonstrates sound scholarship, cogent argument, and an openness to critical debate which speak well of the health of seventeenth-century studies.


A significant and illuminating compilation of sources, documents, and scholarly commentary, *Drama and the Performing Arts in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* offers the reader a taste of pre-eighteenth-century Ireland. With the flair of a gourmet chef, scholar Alan J. Fletcher creates and serves delectable appetizers as well as a banquet of substantial fare upon which one can feast. From the banqueting hall of Tara, through the households of Ireland’s gentry