Letters would be an important addition to the library of anyone interested in Cary studies.


L.E. Semler is also the author of *The English Mannerist Poets and the Visual Arts* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), and his edition of the anonymous *Eliza's Babes* is a laudable contribution to the movement to recover the lives and works of neglected women poets. Semler’s edition, his learned annotations, and his three pertinent periodical articles, make Eliza's poetry far more accessible than the plain facsimile in *Early English Books*.

Of course, Semler’s introduction is not comprehensive—the reader is advised to read Semler’s three periodical articles on *Eliza's Babes*. (These articles were forthcoming when the book was being published.) The introduction and the periodical articles contain valuable insights omitted from the introduction.

The introduction itself seems to ramble from topic to topic, without a compelling schema. For all the theoretical jargon (and puns) describing the editor’s attempt to “locate” the work in a “complex literary-cultural ecosystem of Protestantism flourishing . . . inhabiting a discursive matrix,” the sub-divisions of the introduction seem to be ad hoc rhetorical expedients with no obvious inevitability. Some of the argumentation—like that against previous (and implausible) conjectures that Eliza was a “royalist,” or against the idea that she was a Quaker, a Leveler, or a Rant—are unnecessarily labored. Intellectual history seems to be privileged over economic, social, or political history, and this reader misses the sturdy framework of a clear time-line. Still, the idea of examining the other publications issued by Eliza’s printer is shrewd and illuminating.

Semler claims that *Eliza's Babes* is “scarce, fascinating, deeply and sympathetically human as well as aesthetically original and
ingenious,” that is “a work of genuine literary merit.” Although editors should be sympathetic to their subjects, in my opinion, Eliza’s poetry does not impress by means of its formal qualities, or the originality of the ideas. Frankly, I was quite disappointed after my first reading, but repeated readings have moved me toward liking the writing a little better. (The poems do convey an audible “voice,” they seem to constitute a real series, and they are interlinked in interesting ways.) In my opinion, this is decidedly “minor” poetry, and the comparisons with Herrick, Herbert, or Vaughan are not flattering. “Eliza” never approaches the elegance of Herrick or the eloquence (or nuance) of Herbert; she lacks the aesthetic sense and political consciousness of Vaughan. Eliza does not write as well as Mary Sidney, Mary Wroth, Emilia Lanier, Anne Southwell, Anne Bradstreet, Katherine Phillips, Jane Barker, or Anne Finch, but she still managed to leave a record when many of her peers perished in silence.

Although the literary quality of the poetry leaves much to be desired, the continuing suppression of women makes the collection interesting as a human document, and Eliza’s poetry raises a serious problem of judgment: how does one fairly evaluate the work of the member of an oppressed group? Given the probability of systematic disadvantages—the denial of full access to education, the social stigma, the systematic discouragement—a gifted person from an oppressed group might achieve at a lower level of “technical competence” than a privileged person with more meager talents. Still, formal excellence is never the sole criterion of literary value: awkward craftsmen like Theodore Dreiser, can be major writers; and consummate virtuosos, like Algernon Swinburne, can be relatively unimportant figures. The special difficulties involved in fairly assessing the literary quality or the human significance of the work of a member of an oppressed group preclude my reservations from being conclusive.

The poems are not numbered, but there appear to be 101 poems, and 32 meditations. (Sometimes the typography makes it a little uncertain whether a prose insert is a coda to a preceding poem or a preamble to one following.) The first poem may be a
“proem,” followed by about a hundred poems. If one counts the preface as a meditation, there are thirty-three meditations. The convention of a “century” of sonnets or “resolves,” and the Dantian significance of the number 33 suggest the possibility that some sort of numerology is in play. This pattern would have been more clear if the poems had been numbered in square brackets.

As to formal qualities, these poems, as Semler readily admits, are often crudely worded. Eliza privileges “rhyme over grammar (including the spoiling of subject-verb agreement and syllabification over spelling, and she employs some horrid verbal inversions and circumlocutions as padding” (32). Eliza’s vocabulary is pedestrian, her rhymes tend toward the obvious, and she often resorts to contorted syntax. Still, underneath the flaws, one can sometimes discern a distinctive personality.

In terms of the content, the poems are highly repetitious. They ring changes on a few narrow themes. At times, a few poems and meditations excepted, the personal salvation of the author seems to swallow up all other concerns, including convincing concern for the well-being of anyone else. The tone of the poetry suggests that Eliza was fairly affluent, and the second great commandment—the one which presses Christians toward concerted social activism—does not seem to have had much impact on her view of herself or the world. In roughly 1600 lines of poetry, the word “me” occurs at least 170 times, and the word “I” appears over 350 times.

In terms of the spirit of the verse, one will look in vain for any profound social consciousness: Although Eliza followed the current and supported the English revolution, although she was a reformist, as Semler remarks, there are “no signs of genuine (what we might call “radical”) political freethinking” (19). In the introduction, Semler suggests “Eliza” seems to have been a “Presbyterian” in doctrine (20), but in his Albion essay, he associates her with an “Independent” Calvinist, John Simpson. (By 1652, a significant fraction of the Presbyterians had deserted the Parliamentary cause and joined the Cavaliers.) Semler credits “Eliza” with a “vigorous living out” of her faith, but others will find vapid platitudes. Still, there are occasional revelations of a person genuinely struggling
in the trammels of their belief, trying to reach beyond their mind's horizon. For those with patience and imagination, that can be fascinating.

Although some scholars prefer a “clean” text annotated by distanced endnotes, others of us will prefer more readily accessible footnotes. There are no descriptive running titles for the endnote pages, and some poems are without annotation. Readers are likely to find themselves turning pages to find elusive notes. Some of the notes seem beside the point, or excessively hortatory: compare this; cf. that. Some of the “parallels” seem weak, and others seem like mere commonplaces. On the other hand, Semler has clearly read obscure seventeenth-century tracts and treatises, and some of his points are quite germane. The footnote format would make assessment of the various parallels more straightforward. As it is, I had to “key” my edition with reciprocal notation indicating where I could find the appropriate endnote (or the noted poem) quickly, without using the index or ruffling through pages searching.

Pioneering work is difficult, and first draughts are rarely perfect. As might be expected, there is room for improvement. Still, this edition, and Semler’s three articles should initiate an interesting discussion. Semler’s edition of Eliza’s Babes should be readily available, along with the works of other women poets—Sidney, Wroth, Lanier, Southwell, Bradstreet, Cavendish, Behn, Phillips, Barker, Chudleigh, Ephelia, and Finch—in any decent undergraduate library. Semler’s diligent research facilitates the comprehension of a vanished era.


Sheila Cavanagh certainly knows the highways and byways of romance, its forking paths and endless vistas, as her work on Spenser’s Faerie Queene and now, in Cherished Torment, on Mary