
For this reviewer The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature offers riches beyond the wildest dreams of avarice, too many to be counted or told here. Others will find different glimmers of gold. The editors, David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, follow the aim of the first Cambridge History of English Literature (1907-17) “to meet the highest demands that can be made . . . by men of learning and letters, and to enable the many to share in the knowledge acquired by the few”; with the possible exception of their own introduction, which understandably seeks to compact much into little, the essays that follow will enrich “scholarly, graduate and undergraduate readers” (1-2).

Their volume departs from its predecessor in that the terms “major” and “minor” do not occur, “background” is not severed from “literature,” the term “renaissance” appears infrequently, there are no essays devoted to a single writer (indeed, as they point out, several appear in multiple chapters, viewed from multiple perspectives). The essays touch on a number of women writers, focusing on “the dynamic interactions between text and institutional contexts” and correct new historical oversights concerning religious developments and conflicts (7, 9). Writing about arguments for making an English bible accessible to all, Janel Mueller speaks of their “zigzag course” (279), and the phrase suggests neatly one fine feature of many of the essays: their manner of presenting non-linear contradictions, revisions, echoes, and repetitions of arguments, language, images, etc. in the verbal textures under examination.
The book opens with six excellent essays on the overall “modes and means of literary production, circulation, and reception”: “Literacy, Society and Education” by Kenneth Charlton and Margaret Spufford, “Manuscript Transmission and Circulation” by Arthur Marotti, “Print, Literary Culture and the Book Trade” by David Scott Kasten, “Literary Patronage” by Graham Parry, “Languages of Early Modern Literature in Britain” by Paula Blank, and “Habits of Reading and Early Modern Literary Culture” by Steven Zwicker. Their approaches are as diverse as their subjects, and all ought to be required reading in graduate seminars.

Thereafter four sections mince the time-span from Reformation to Revolution: “The Tudor Era from the Reformation to Elizabeth I” (to 1558), “The Era of Elizabeth and James VI” (up to 1603), “The Earlier Stuart Era” (to 1640), and “The Civil War and Commonwealth Era.” Each of those four sections opens with an essay on “Literature and National Identity,” the last almost an oxymoron. “Literature and the Court” follows, but is dropped at the civil war era, as is “Literature and the Church,” replaced by “Literature and Religion” after 1640. Even so much signals that, after 1640, effectively there was no court or church. Beginning with the era of Elizabeth, we have essays on “Literature and London” right the way through, not surprisingly. Under Elizabeth’s and the early Stuart era, we have “Literature and the Theatre,” which also does not surprise when it disappears in the civil wars. In the last two seventeenth-century sections, essays on “Literature and the Household” are added, and in the final section the last two essays concern “Alternative Sites for Literature” and “From Revolution to Restoration in English Literary Culture.” Both these continuities and alterations are significant. Where there is continuity in this arrangement, one can make out some narrative, although the variations, inconsistencies, and zigzags are clearly represented as well. In what follows, I shall focus on the continuities.

Essays on “Literature and National Identity” suggest that a sense of English identity bloomed, especially under Elizabeth, while Scottish identity was early on more fragile. David Loades notes
that English "literary expressions of identity are few and indirect" before Elizabeth's reign (226), exceptions being John Bale, Thomas Smith, John Foxe, and tracts by the "commonwealth men" of Edward VI's reign. Claire McEachern explains the causes why "the Scottish nation was an especially imaginary community in this [Elizabethan] moment; however, writers were hardly stopped from imagining it (319). Loades refers to "the comparatively developed nature of the English state, and the defining fires through which it passed," the subject of most of his essay. He makes the point that, like Henry VIII's "Great Matter," Mary's marriage "put the issue of lawful limitation firmly on the agenda again, thereby raising once more the whole question of where the identity of the realm should be located" (211), since both raised issues of foreign domination. McEachern reminds us that in England, the "fiction of intimacy between Crown and community" and a uniform liturgy "helped to breed a brief but powerful patriotic literature whose sentimental force can often mask the cultural contradictions of its moment" (325). "Both King Lear and Macbeth generate their visions of royal heroism against the backdrop of a nation whose centre cannot hold. So too Spenser's footsore knights, Drayton's heart-sore royals and Foxe's suffering bodies all render an England as much melancholy as merry" (337).

By 1660 fragmentation eventuated in privatizing dreams. Johann Sommerville proposes both that "a strong sense of nationhood was a major theme in the literature of the three kingdoms which James and Charles tried to rule" and that "national allegiances were often in tension with allegiance to the Crown" (461). Derek Hirst reminds us that the body politic lost its head in 1649. In "1640 the ideal of an inclusive body politic dominated most discourse, [yet] by 1660 there was a growing readiness to imagine a denatured public world outside of which the individual [of many different religious and ideological sorts] found private consolation" (638), a theme which returns in other essays. Sommerville argues that both James and Charles were criticized not for absolutism but for their policies (474). "One's patria is wherever it is well with him," Hirst quotes Milton's letter of 1666,
noting he does not use “England” (634). Was it England or Britain (both, from time to time as occasion served)? Did Rome provide a model and was it republican or imperial (both upon occasion) or was it Jerusalem?

Concerning “literature and the court,” William A. Sessions charts “the interplay at court between would-be absolute monarchs and individual text-makers strong in their desire to create” (230) in pre-Elizabethan England. Particularly “during the political shifts in the late Henrician, Edwardian, and Marian courts” writers developed “skills in the technology of rhetoric” (239), carefully “warning implicitly of the court tensions in which death remains the first reality” (240, emphasis mine), as they learned “how to represent a self that perceived itself not just as personal but collective” (241). Sessions points to Mary’s cosmopolitan sensibility as furthering Petrarchanism, while Catherine Bates explains (for me) the very negative, English tinting of Petrarch’s work as both “the obvious way to flatter the Queen” and one which “allowed men to rehearse in powerfully charged words their condition of disempowerment” (365). Bates’ focus is on “the court as literature, courting as poesie,” and urge that to “be at court, to play the courtier, to fawn, flatter and ingratiate oneself are specifically seen as forms of self-making—of being on the make—and are therefore forms of poesis, the careful cultivation of appearances and of rhetorical artifice” (351, 349). Leah Marcus begins with the proposition that under James, “significant elements of court culture were more visible to the nation” than they had ever been—among other ways, through the printing of masques (487); James descended “to a conversation” with his subjects by printing his texts (490), while Charles, in contrast, preferred not to enter the public sphere. Hence, the court, initially seen as nurturing the nation, “was reinterpreted as an imposition of cultural tyranny” (511) during his reign.

In essays on “Literature and the Church” a basic consensus forms that, as suggested by the Elizabethan Settlement itself, the Church of England was a highly negotiated, relatively flexible body—until it collapsed and we read of “Literature and Religion.”
Visions of uniformity danced in government eyes before Elizabeth, although Janel Mueller develops a nice sense of the often self-contradictory course of Reformation writing about such issues as the vernacular bible (279). Patrick Collinson nudges the common projection of “Puritan versus Anglican” in Elizabeth’s reign in part by concluding: “[w]hen in Kipling’s phrase, the tumult and the shouting died, it appears that these were, after all, all Christians” (398). Roman spiritual manuals were frequently Protestantized. The hordes of catechisms so mingle one cannot sort out doctrinal differences, revealing in part “the less than tightly regulated society of early modern England” (382). Deborah Shugar shows carry-overs from pre-Reformation spirituality in early Stuart writing, and how clerics of diverse sensibilities could create a “not . . . particularly decorous voice” of “inward” complaint which could suddenly respond “to a sense of present grace and benediction” in “an act of trust, of assurance seeking reassurance” (524, 525).

One could argue that Puritanism collapsed together with the Church of England, perhaps by 1642. David Loewenstein and John Morrill explain that whereas writers had contested within the Church, after 1642 the “war of words” became purely sectarian. Richard Baxter’s anguish, over “Families ruined; Congregations ruined. . . . Who weeps not when all these bleed” (698), suggests the ecclesiastical vacuum created. Loewenstein and Morrill write, “Teeming liberty had as much shape as a lava flow. But some channels are clear amidst the smoke and the glow” (665). Even Presbyterians, although they could agree on doctrine and worship could not agree concerning “government” (680), and the sects simply increased the problem, to Baxter’s dismay. Finally, Milton exemplifies “the extraordinary usurpation” of laymen “on the near monopoly of the clergy” both in pulpit and in print (676).

Lawrence Manley sets the tone for the next group of essays when he presents both “Literature” and “London” under Elizabeth as carnivalesque, their impact both “centripetal and centrifugal” as they simultaneously promoted “consolidation and cohesion” and “undermined older traditions” (400). Attention alternates between
the high and the low. On the one hand, as Thomas N. Corns notes, “much of the official cultural activity . . . reflected aspirations of oligarchic groups that controlled the guilds and governing bodies,” while evading the impact both of the “changes to the economy and social structure . . . posed by the growth of the suburbs” and of Puritan preaching (564). On the other hand, Isabella Whitney’s “Will” dramatizes Elizabethan, economic specialization (410-13), while pamphlet writers, “themselves literary confidence men,” assumed the pose of uncovering cony-catchers (417). Satire developed such sharp teeth much of it was burned in 1599. Jonson fostered writing that trenchantly dealt with the dangerous realities of life in the city, while city comedy sought to cover those dangers. Again, much writing between 1603 and 1640 affirmed “the ancient loyalism of the City” (550), Corns notes, while the reaction to the mutilating of Burton, Bastwick and Prynne “comprised one defiant discourse of opposition in the controlled and repressive days of the late 1630s” (563), a tale Nigel Smith pursues when pointing out that, in the 1640s and 1650s, London “pinned its colours to Parliament,” the Republic, and Protectorate, despite its former professions of loyalty (715). Generational power struggles persisted after 1640 while the city fostered a diverse “religious life” (716). In Areopagitica Milton proposed London as a “city of refuge,” while the Levellers wrote to break the chains of free-born citizens. Subsequently, armed forces invaded the refuge of Leveller households and imposed “the new tyranny” (729). Interregnum publishing waned, much of it focused, significantly, not on London but elsewhere (Diggers, Hobbes, Harrington, to some extent Marvell). Yet Livewell Chapman’s Chaos suggests “the almost frantic operation of London’s public sphere” as the Restoration approached (734).

David Bevington opens a tale of diversity in “Literature and the Theatre,” and concludes that “[d]rama of the Renaissance, once a bright hope of the Reformers, has become commercialized and satirical to the extent that thoughtful intellectual observers are ready to give it up for lost” by the end of Elizabeth’s reign (456). Initially, reformers, both in Scotland and in London, felt theater
could be corrective or provide role models. “Puritan opposition to the stage” which developed slowly, “was very specifically fuelled by the building of new theatre structures in the 1570s, 1580s, and 1590s, and by the ‘profane’ kinds of drama those locations were generating” (451). Martin Butler brings out further tangles after 1603. Through patronage, “Crown and theatre contracted an intimacy which lasted until both were overthrown” in 1642 (567). Tastes in the Court differed from those in the playhouses, the latter attacked because they were thought to disturb trade, increase idleness, and gather large crowds; indeed they might be idolatrous. Players, meanwhile, increasingly thought of themselves as professionals. Mixed audiences attended either boy or adult actors, houses at times seemed to specialize (particularly the open and roofed spaces), city comedy played both with and for citizens and their values, while more aristocratically focused works showed the dangers of high place. The tastes of Caroline audiences’ grew more markedly differentiated, enacting, perhaps, a larger fragmentation in the body politic.

Helen Wilcox, makes an interesting argument about “Literature and the Household” after 1640, assuming “that, in mid seventeenth-century England, writing came home (so to speak), driven towards the private sphere by the instability of public social and cultural structures” (737), in zigzag contrast to many other essays which develop the importance of the public sphere before and particularly after 1640. “Household” had many valences, she explains well, including houses, owners, families, dependents, cattle, fields, but also intellectual, religious, and literary sites. Guns and war proved in many cases that households were not secure refuges and were invaded much as Milton’s “city of refuge” was. Yet, as Hirst suggests, the “household could . . . take on the tasks and trappings of an entire community of home, school and church” (743) in a privatizing movement. The house was seen often as “the woman’s centre” (745), and much of the literature Wilcox considers thoroughly was by women. Margaret Cavendish “summed up the range as follows: ‘Some Devotions, or Romances, or Receits of
Medicines, for Cookery or Confectioners, or Complemental Letters, or a Copy or two of Verses” (752), and Wilcox explores examples of each plus overlaps.

The “Alternative Sites for Literature” which Joshua Scodel analyzes are more or less sites of retreat, constructions “at some remove from the era’s political, religious, and military conflicts” and are “mainly Royalist” (763, emphasis mine), as the following list suggests: Robert Herrick, Henry Vaughan, John Hall, Sir John Denham, Richard Lovelace, Izaak Walton, Andrew Marvell, Margaret Cavendish, and Katherine Philips. Drinking songs evaded crisis another way, as did collections of drolleries. Intellectuals created mental structures—the Cambridge Platonists, Hartlib’s circle, and the Oxford club, which became the Royal Society among them.

James Grantham Turner traces the final zigzag “From Revolution to Restoration,” noting how events after 1660 kept the revolution at center stage, in part both by maligning it and looking back beyond it. There were changes and continuities. “Lords, bishops, and church courts,” as well as “Gentlemen of the Bedchamber and Masters of the revels, Law French, organs and bells, theatres, long hair, Maypoles and Christmas pies” all came back; “by contrast, nobody tried to revive Star Chamber, Ship Money, feudal tenures or monopolies. The monarchy had been revealed as contingent” (792-3). Marvell, Milton, and Wither did not adulate Charles II, while many who did recycled or redraped their former tributes to Cromwell. Those who squabbled in the 1640s and 1650s made “common cause for liberty of conscience,” yet they attacked the “Declaration of Indulgence”—Anglicans, Parliament, and Milton—out of fear of Roman Catholicism. Outbursts of popular royalism, in riots, spread through the “upper-class expropriation of popular ‘riot’” while “ranting” came to signify “the ‘frolicks’ of a gentleman” devoid of religious zeal (801). Puritan memorials like Bunyan’s Grace Abounding and Milton’s great verse appeared simultaneously with pornography, lampoons, and mock-heroic. Although Dryden tried to make the regime heroic, Marvell’s Last Instructions suggests how “the Restoration’s true progeny is
satire” (814). Emphasis on a plain style and verification “united certain factions that were otherwise totally opposed” (827)—basically puritans and naturalists. “Compared to sleek performances . . . [of] canonical ‘Restoration’ dramas . . . the theatre of the 1660s looks quite heterogeneous” (831). Styles and modes were in flux.

Indeed, styles, modes, arguments, language, worship, modes of production, social status (the list could go on) were in flux from the Reformation through to the Revolution and beyond. Highlighting the fluidity of that flux is, in my view, a principal strength of this history.


Alex Davis tilts a lance at the traditional scholarly approach to chivalric practice in Elizabethan and seventeenth-century life and chivalric themes in the literature of the period—an approach (he contends) that both underestimates and misunderstands the significance of romance material. Davis quotes Sir Thomas Overbury on the “Chamber-Mayde” who “is so carried away with the Myrrour of Knighthood, she is many times resolv’d to run out of her selfe and become a Ladie Errant” (26). Similarly, a contemporary (1615) satiric poem presents various clients at a stationer’s shop: of the “Countrrey-Farmer” it is said that “King Arthur, Bevis, or Syr Guye . . . are the Bookes he onely loves to buye” (25). These satiric moments cannot, however, outweigh the abundant evidence adduced by Davis to establish that “chivalric romances—of both the ‘naïve’ and the ‘sophisticated’ variety—were consumed at all levels of society during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, from the very top down” (28). This well-supported argument commands respect.

More debatable is Davis’s second thesis: that what he calls “the trope of Quixoticism—the idea that Renaissance chivalry could only ever exist as an object of humour, as a comic anachronism” (37)—has seriously misled scholars. Reading Cervantes’ Don in this