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Review of Christopher D'Addario and Matthew C. Augustine, eds., *Texts and Readers in the Age of Marvell*

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Christopher D'Addario and Matthew Augustine, eds., *Texts and Readers in the Age of Marvell*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. Pp. 272; Hardback £85

Renaming the seventeenth-century the “age of Marvell” is presumably a tempting prospect for any reader of *Marvell Studies*. But what exactly does the “age of Marvell” look like? How does it differ from the “age of Milton”? Or from the “age of Dryden”? Conveniently, and famously, all three of these writers walked together in the funeral procession of Oliver Cromwell, and they seem to have thought well of each other, whatever Dryden’s later attempts to cover up his past. Would the “age of Marvell,” if that is how we thought of it, look so very different from these other, more familiar ways of dividing up literary history? The question is addressed directly, if briefly, in the “Afterword” to this collection by Steven N. Zwicker—for whom the volume is really a *festschrift* in all but name. (Presumably it is lightly disguised as a stand-alone collection because of publishers’ aversion these days to publishing *festschriften*.)

Zwicker amusingly observes that while a Google search for “the age of Milton” yielded him 372,000 results—not that far behind “the age of Shakespeare”—a search for “the age of Marvell” got him a grand total of four hits. (Since the publication of this volume, that number will have risen considerably, although I refrained from checking.) Zwicker wonders whether “the fluidity or mobility or uncertainty revealed in Marvell’s writings” might not offer a better “guide for the perplexed, a guide to his age?” (249, 247). Zwicker thinks of Marvell as a writer of “accommodation” and “uncertainty”—in other words, far more like Dryden than Milton—and this is precisely the opposite of how Marvell was regarded when he was recovered as a Protestant patriot in the early eighteenth century. In his landmark two-volume 1726 edition of the *Works*, Thomas Cooke offered “a pattern for all freeborn Englishmen in the life of a worthy patriot, whose every action has truly merited to him, with *Astrides*, the surname of the Just.”¹ Far from ideologically mobile or uncertain, Cooke’s Marvell personified enduring and unbending Whig principles.

The Marvell of *Texts and Readers in the Age of Marvell* is certainly closer to Dryden than Milton: there is a dedicated essay on Dryden and the “politics of cold” by Anne Cotterill, which interestingly applies recent work on the relationship between climate and historical change to cultural artefacts (in this case Dryden and Purcell’s *King Arthur*) and Matthew Augustine writes eloquently about Dryden’s *The State of Innocence*—once memorably described by Joad Raymond in *Milton’s Angels* (2010) as “*Paradise Lost* thrown in a blender”²—as a relatively coherent “contribution to libertine literature in

¹ Thomas Cooke, “The Life of Andrew Marvell Esq.,” in *The Works of Andrew Marvell Esq.*, 2 vols. (London, 1726), 1:2.

² Joad Raymond, *Milton’s Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 333.

the 1670s” (239). Indeed only five of the twelve essays are actually focused on Marvell, and none of the four essays in the section entitled “Rethinking context” is concerned primarily with him. Milton is conspicuous by his relative absence throughout. Christopher D’Addario makes it clear in his introduction that this is a collection primarily concerned with “authors who shifted or reversed their political and religious affiliations—and apparently beliefs—as the circumstances shifted or reversed around them” (1). An “Age of Marvell,” he continues, “foregrounds the uncertainties and complexities with which writers were faced as the remarkable events of these years moved swiftly around them” (4).

As D’Addario himself acknowledges, it really depends on what Marvell we choose to privilege: the post-Restoration Marvell looks more like Cooke’s Whig patriot in his commitment to liberty of conscience and religious toleration (and many years of service as MP for Hull) than the lyric and pastoral poet of the (mainly) late 1640s and early 1650s coming to terms with the effects of civil war and regicide on the communities and relationships of Caroline England. Nonetheless the emphasis of this volume on how the allegiance and beliefs of an individual are not static but shaped by the experience of events (or by travel, or by conversations with others) is a signal development on later twentieth-century modes of literary-historical study that tended to begin with how a writer looked at the end of their writing lives and then proceed by a kind of reverse teleology to show how they were always already like that. (Barbara Lewalski’s *The Life of John Milton* (2000), is perhaps the last great example of this tendency.) We may sacrifice consistency for contingency, but, as Matthew Augustine has also shown in his 2018 monograph, *Aesthetics of Contingency: Writing, Politics, and Culture in England, 1639–89*, what we gain is greater sensitivity to the complexity and care of writers’ responses to external events. Although I would argue, and have recently done so in *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton* (2020), that the young Milton, at least, was as subject to the contingencies of events and associations in his writing and allegiance as anyone else. The division projected in this volume between a staunch Milton and a mobile Marvell may be rather misleading about Milton.

I am less persuaded that this emphasis on the relationship between mobility of belief and historical process can be valuably extended to questions of literary methodology. As someone who confesses to finding the debate between “contextualism” and “formalism,” or indeed any other kind of “ism,” as somewhat beside the point—there are people who write and argue well, and people who argue and write less well, and that is the important distinction, whatever kind of method they might be categorized as adopting—I approach with some impatience essays that claim we have lost the sense of reading for pleasure, or the “literariness of literature,” through the dominance of

a contextualist study that is caricatured as philistine. Michael Schoenfeldt believes that “the time is right for a reconsideration of the virtues of fiercely close readings that search out rather than suppress their historical underpinnings” (22). But surely the best “contextualist” literary criticism always combines rigorous close reading with a careful excavation of historical context, and the less good fails to do so. And as D’Addario nicely puts it, “many of the calls for presentist early modernism have the nervous air of self-preservation about them” (99). Indeed D’Addario’s essay, “A sense of place: historicism, whither wilt?,” does a rather good job of showing the exciting diversity of methodological approaches that currently abound, and underlines (from my perspective, if maybe not his) the irrelevance of current attacks on (in that unlvely, pseudo-scientific term) “historicism” in the cause of some conveniently ethereal notion of “the literary.”

Perhaps the most interesting essay in the volume is a good example of this methodological cosmopolitanism: Derek Hirst develops some of the issues at the edges of *Orphan of the Hurricane* (2012), the uneven but always interesting psycho-biography of Marvell that he wrote with Zwicker, to consider how we might locate the representation of sexualized abuse of children in the textual evidence from this period. Hirst spends some time on a remarkable pamphlet, the anonymous *Childrens Petition* (1669), which protests against beating in the schoolroom as an index of the unnatural desires of the schoolmaster. Hirst’s essay is a brilliantly innovative and sensitive exploration of the topic, which made me think anew about episodes such as Milton’s famous alleged beating at the hands of his tutor William Chappell at Christ’s College.

The “readers” part of the volume’s title is justified by contributions from Kathleen Lynch, on the puritan Nehemiah Wallington’s voluminous manuscript writings as anticipating the genre of the spiritual autobiography, and from Randy Robertson, who takes the statistical long view on the ever-controversial topic of the imposition and effectiveness of press censorship in the 1640s. Any student of Marvell, or indeed mid-seventeenth-century poetry, will need to read Nigel Smith’s “The European Marvell,” which continues Smith’s major reorienting of English literary culture towards the continent and other vernacular literatures, in this case making unexpected connections between Marvell and the Spanish model offered by Góngora. The argument makes much sense given both Marvell’s fascination with baroque imagery and the interest in translating Góngora evident in Thomas Stanley’s circle in the late 1640s—a circle which, I have argued at length in *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars* (2008), was key to Marvell’s poetic and political development. As Smith concludes, “Marvell’s poetry has its precise greatness through its international dialogue with poets who were particularly attractive to him, poets not known through bookish imitation but through travel, careful study, and conflict” (185).

Timothy Raylor also turns to the more traditional virtues of excavating literary models and allusions in Marvell in his account of the presence of Tasso and the romance mode in “The Last Instructions to a Painter”; Raylor also brings Edmund Waller into the conversation, a minor version of Dryden in his fluctuating allegiances and another who had a Cromwellian past to hide. Alex Garganigo makes the narrower argument that Marvell is thinking of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* in his elegy for Cromwell, specifically in the line “I saw him dead”: if the precise claim is hard to validate, it is useful to think about Marvell reading Shakespeare, particularly in light of the sensational identification of Milton’s copy of the First Folio. Finally, two essays by Joad Raymond and Michael McKeon nicely dovetail with one another in considering Marvell the political writer, respectively as poet and then as Restoration prose writer. McKeon makes a complex argument about how the aims of Restoration satire such as Marvell’s *Rehearsal Transposed* can be hard to pin down because it is an inherently parodic mode poised between the directness of face-to-face address and the “seeming impersonality” of print (70); I found the essay intriguing but hard to follow. Raymond returns to the “Horatian Ode” and its dependence on the language of the newsbook accounts of the regicide to ask us whether the line that we tend to draw between the literary nature of the “Ode” and the non-literary nature of the newsbooks is one that would have made much sense to Marvell: it is, Raymond concludes, “the reportage that makes the poetry possible” (47)—a salutary response to the methodological speculations that frame this valuable volume, which provides much more intellectual and literary substance than the typical *festschrift*. If anything, the volume is testimony not to the outdated nature of “contextualism” but to the healthy methodological diversity in the current work on Marvell—even while that work is usually underpinned by sound biographical, historical, and bibliographical study, something evident also in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

