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## Review of Anita Gilman Sherman's *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt*

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Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 270; Hardback \$99.00.

Anita Gilman Sherman's *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt* brings the four key terms of its title into surprising combination. "Problems of doubt" emerge not just from the philosophical realm of "skepticism," but from the aesthetic realm of "early modern English literature." And the "pleasures of doubt" obtain not only in the reading of imaginative writing but in the process of intellectual questioning. By applying each term to its unlikely partner, Sherman brings intellectual history to bear on literary analysis and, to a lesser extent, literary analysis to bear on intellectual history.

Sherman tells the story of seven major British writers whom she associates with skepticism because of their commitment to asking philosophical questions in and of their writing. What emerged from this process of inquiry was a secular mode that served as fertile ground for literary innovation—for new aesthetic pleasures—in early modern England. Drawing on key topics within the discourse of skepticism—nominalism, private language, neutrality, sovereignty, and aesthetic discrimination—Sherman offers insightful, indeed pleasurable, readings of familiar texts by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, and Milton, while introducing us to less studied texts and contexts for the writings and lives of Cherybry and Cavendish.

The book's five chapters link an early modern topic to an early modern writer (Shakespeare and Donne share a chapter), but the book, as a whole, takes as its frame the work of modern intellectual historians and theorists, whose names—Agamben, Barthes, Blumenberg, Cavell, Wittgenstein—appear not just in the notes but often in the exposition itself. By way of these interlocutors, Sherman makes a provocative claim, near the outset of the book, for skepticism's power to foster civil liberties and religious freedoms in our own age of intolerance as well as in that of early modern England. Such an expectant gesture carries with it a certain danger: the danger of reading the past for the origins of what we hope for the future. Although this danger shadows the book—especially its treatment of skepticism as it relates to secularism—Sherman avoids its pitfalls by holding to a careful definition of skepticism. Skepticism was not and is not an ideology, but an intellectual posture, a condition in process, inflecting belief at different angles and producing a variety of social, emotional, and aesthetic effects.

It is this definition that Sherman brings to her reading of early modern texts. What is less clear is if these same imaginative texts altered the definitions and discourses, indeed the trajectory, of early modern intellectual history. A march from nominalism to aesthetic discrimination seems almost inevitable in Sherman's account; literature

plays the accessory to history, registering its changes and largely staying out of the way, re-enchanted in its own world by the creation of aesthetic pleasures. Perhaps by holding fast to this story of philosophical development, Sherman misses an opportunity to imagine how the study of literary texts might change our view of the history of ideas, indeed of the history of ideas like tolerance and civil liberty. Yet for the scholar who would take on this important interdisciplinary work, Sherman's book will be invaluable; hers is the first literary study of early modern skepticism to consider more than one genre of writing, a capacious approach that allows each chapter to open whole fields for further inquiry.

Chapter one shows how Spenser's obsession with the elusiveness of knowledge—his yearning for a poetics to capture the internal and the transcendent, the particular and the universal—finds expression in such texts as the November *Eclogue*, the vision on Mount Acidale in Book VI of the *Faerie Queene*, and *The Mutability Cantos*. Sherman locates the origins of Spenser's hunger for the language of immediate experience in an encounter with nominalist thought at Cambridge. Her second chapter continues this attention to language, shifting from problems about knowing the world to the problem of knowing other minds. Sherman reads patterns of voicing and examples of listening in Shakespeare's "Phoenix and the Turtle" and Donne's "The Ecstasy" alongside sixteenth-century efforts to recover a private, prelapsarian language. Shakespeare's poem resists the intimacy of such a language, whereas resistance seems to find resolution in Donne's verse, skeptical distance dissolving into wholeness. The treatment of two early modern literary giants in the book's shortest chapter is surprising. But readers looking for fuller discussion of skepticism in Donne and Shakespeare have many places to turn—not least to Sherman's earlier work.

Not so for the subjects of the book's third and fourth chapters, who have received rather less attention. Lord Herbert of Cherbury's *De veritate* is often cited as a key response to early modern skepticism, but, for Sherman, his philosophical program was not just a matter of ideas. Cherbury developed concepts and vocabularies of neutrality, conformity, and universal consent as insurance against the doubts that come when following the truth of belief—doubts that came as he negotiated the tumult of the English Civil Wars. In reading Cherbury's philosophy as both politics and poetics, Sherman brings him into conversation with the principled conformists and moderates described by Gregory Dodds and Ethan Shagan and (though too recent to be cited) with the neuters of Robert Stillman's latest book.<sup>1</sup> Sherman then explores the prose of

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory D. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Ethan H. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Robert E. Stillman, *Christian Identity, Piety, and Politics in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

Margaret Cavendish, whose investigative process, reliant on reason and experimental action, encouraged a skepticism which increased during her life. Through a reading that relies heavily on Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology, Sherman argues that Cavendish used metaphors to reoccupy conceptual vacancies left in received stories. Framed against a real fear of oblivion, the imaginary cities and figures of bejeweled female truth-seekers in Cavendish's royalist prose gave new answers to old questions about sovereignty.

For readers of this journal, the book's last chapter, on Marvell, will be of greatest interest. Sherman argues that Marvell falls in love with the world "with his eyes wide open"; his philosophical skepticism produces a lyricism of enchantment, a "consensual seduction driven by an aesthetic appreciation for the world's surprises" (176-7). In Marvell's verse, Sherman finds a skepticism that enchants even as it secularizes—that epitomizes the final step from nominalism to aesthetic discrimination. And so, in "The Garden," problems of perception lead to pleasure, as the mind moves into deeper and deeper abstraction, into a removed happiness. Such skeptical moods produce the figure of the discriminating critic, actively evaluating and testing the Miltonic sublime in the verse prefatory to *Paradise Lost* and taking pleasure in the doubt-inducing hallucinations of architecture, of grasshoppers, and of mowers in *Upon Appleton House*. Though these moments seem to fall short of the sublime, Sherman argues that it is in the ironic play of proportion that the sublime emerges under the shadow of skepticism. In the same manner, the spectators in and of the astonishing political events of "An Horatian Ode" hesitate in a sort of kairotic time-knot, suspending judgement and testing the politics and aesthetics on offer from Charles and from Cromwell, before re-entering the chronology of secular time. Sherman's reading of Marvellian skepticism in these poems resembles both David Carroll Simon's "careless" Marvell and Matthew C. Augustine's "contingent" Marvell except that, for Sherman, Marvell's aesthetic of doubt is primarily "a symptom of skepticism's secularization" (223).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Sherman understands Marvell's spectator poems—the gaze found especially in his lyrics about young girls—not as working on biography, as in the reading of Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker (though their readings, too, share a certain resemblance), but as skeptical investigations along the boundaries of taste, the poet searching for lapses in judgement and edging over borders as he tries on different voices, positions, and tonalities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Carroll Simon, "Andrew Marvell and the Epistemology of Carelessness," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 553-88; and Matthew C. Augustine, *Aesthetics of Contingency: Writing, Politics, and Culture in England, 1639-89* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), especially chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

After making such a strong case for the sublimity that comes from secular skepticism, it is striking that Sherman turns, in her afterword, to one of the least secular poets of early modern England. Her brief reading of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* shows how the very concept of experience is in crisis as both Samson and his audiences doubt his internal urges and self-assertions. In Milton's poem, the problems of doubt are clear, but where are the pleasures found so readily in Marvell? Where does Milton fit in the story of skepticism's secularization? Samson is, to be sure, sublime, but perhaps for Milton, unlike his fellow poet and sometime collaborator, the problems and pleasures of his verse, indeed of his philosophy, are those of conviction rather than of doubt.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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