



1996

The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley, vol. 2: Poems (1656) - Part 1: The Mistress (Book Review)

Sidney Gottlieb

Sacred Heart University, gottliebs@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, Sidney. "The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley, vol. 2: Poems (1656) - Part 1: The Mistress". (Book Review) *Renaissance Quarterly* 49.4 (1996): 882-884.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication and Media Arts (SCMA) at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

Lee M. Johnson's paper on "The Structure of Wit" at the very beginning — but the reader is early challenged by Helen Wilcox's direct handling of a subject where wit is thought to have been repudiated: the case of devotional poetry, a stratagem M. C. Allen returns to later in considering wit in relation to Herbert's pastoral concerns. The final essay, by Katherine M. Quinsey, considers the apparent *rejection* of wit in Dryden's *Religio Laici*. All the essays are "witty" in this sense, taking the unexpected and shaking out its various possibilities. Once or twice the results are all too familiar; according to Robert C. Evans, "wit" in Jonson's *Epigrammes* operates morally; women's wit can be submissive, but is often subversive, argues Erna Kelly. Once or twice inexpert handling, never a mark of wit, frustrates consent, as in Catherine Gimelli Martin's anxiously overargued "Pygmalion's Progress in the Garden of Love, or the Wit's Work is never Donne." There is more than we need on Donne and Herbert; only one tempting essay — Sharon Cadman Selig's — concerns Lovelace, and nothing substantial appears concerning King, Cowley, Cleveland or some of the lesser (though deserving) wits. Yet William Sessions' superb discussion of the "balancing wit" of Marvell's "Mower" poems shows how much these often worked-over poems still have to yield for us.

A recurrent theme throughout is Freud's insistence on the complicity of the hearer of a joke: that wit needs an audience. Jim Ellis's essay on the circumcision of Christ in seventeenth-century poetry attacks this problem directly, by pointing out how much the theme of the circumcision astonishes and repels the modern reader. He then proceeds to show deftly why a seventeenth-century reader would have thought differently, and finally ties the unfolding of his topic into a number of

seventeenth-century themes that connect modernism and new historicism rather than secluding them from each other. None of these essays much mentions the sheer *éclat* required of the seventeenth-century wit, but Ellis's modest, knowing, and richly informative essay surely enacts it.

GERMAINE WARKENTIN

Victoria College, University of Toronto

Thomas O. Calhoun, Laurence Heyworth, and J. Robert King, eds. Ernest W. Sullivan II, textual consultant. *The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley*. Volume 2: Poems (1656). Part I: *The Mistress*. Newark: University of Delaware Press. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993. 649 pp. \$80.00.

Our view of the seventeenth century has for a long time been too narrow, like Tom Jones's tutor Thwackum's view of theology: by the seventeenth century we mean the English seventeenth century, and not just the English seventeenth century but especially the earlier seventeenth century, and not just the earlier seventeenth century but the high poetic earlier seventeenth century represented by and enshrined in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Milton, and a few others. New publishing ventures and teaching and research initiatives with varying agendas are, of course, changing all that. The combination of the Brown University Women Writers Project and the Oxford University Press Women Writers in English series, for example, promises to be one of the great uncovering processes of our time, such that we will no longer — for lack of materials — be able to overlook literary women, broadly de-

fined, in the seventeenth century. In this sense — albeit in a somewhat different vein — *The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley* promises to be one of the great recovery projects of modern seventeenth-century scholarship, redressing many years of neglect of a poet who was popular, prolific, respected, and influential, anything but unnoticed in his time.

Cowley's works are in very good hands, and the volumes published so far are models of patient collation, thorough documentation, and restrained, helpful critical annotation. Perhaps at first glance the Scriblerian aspects of the volumes may seem a bit too prominent. When Humphrey Moseley first printed *The Mistress* in 1647, he promised the reader that "I shall use no more preface, nor add one word (besides these few lines) to the Booke; but faithfully and nakedly transmit it to thy view, just as it came to mine." By contrast, in volume 2 of the *Collected Works*, *The Mistress* is far from unadorned: the text takes up only slightly more than 100 pages, followed by more than 500 pages of textual notes, collations, and commentary. Some of this is editorial overkill, born in part from the new technological capacity to fulfill an old editorial directive, that of tracking and reporting all the minutiae of textual transmission. This generates a great deal of information that has at best limited usefulness.

Much of the secondary material in the volume, though, is extremely valuable. The textual introduction sorts out the key manuscripts and editions and nicely describes the way Cowley's poems came to be printed, authorially revised, then reprinted. The explanatory notes on *The Mistress* first summarize the biographical background and early reception of the volume, and then add poem-by-poem comments, focusing on recurrent themes and images, and especially on Cowley's poetic debts. Ovid,

Donne, and Jonson figure most prominently here, followed by references to poets, mostly Royalists, who form one of Cowley's most immediate contexts of poetic exchange, including Carew, Waller, Lovelace, Crashaw, Marvell, Shirley, Brome, and Randolph. For a volume of this size, this section of just over 80 pages seems all-too-brief. It is the only section one would have wished to be longer.

The editors' treatment of musical settings of poems from *The Mistress* takes up over half the volume, and rightly so. Cowley's tremendous popularity is measured not only by the number of editions of his poems — eighteen between 1647 and 1721 — and the many manuscript transcriptions of his works, but also by the variety of musical settings of his poems that appear in manuscript and printed collections. The editors include sixty settings of forty poems, and besides highlighting Cowley's musical qualities as a poet, this allows a close examination of various performance modifications of his texts and, as the editors point out, confirms that Cowley had not one but many audiences: courtly and urban, musical and literary, public and private, and coterie.

Along with many other adjustments being made to the contours of the seventeenth century, there is currently a revival of interest in and new awareness of the complexity of Cavalier poetry. What used to be dismissed as propagandistic complaint and encomium, poetry of retreat, and superficial wit applied to third-generation Petrarchism is now being reexamined by a generation of critics attuned to the philosophical and political components of a Cavalier poetics and erotics of inconstancy, withdrawal, willful subjection, and prolonged desire. The *Collected Works*, especially when they are completed as planned in six vol-

umes, should help make Cowley figure prominently in this critical re-examination.

SIDNEY GOTTLIEB
Sacred Heart University

Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield, and Willy Maley, eds. *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 4pls. + xxiv + 235 pp. \$54.95.

This collection is actually a good deal more various than either the title or the editors' introduction might lead one to suppose. Editors Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley speak in the introductory chapter of "the representation of politics and the politics of representation" (1); of Ireland "as a complex, differentiated, heterogeneous and variegated text" (3); and of the essays here collected as enacting "a contextualization, questioning and challenging the tidiness of modern separations and distinctions" (18). "Ireland was a disputed territory in more ways than one," they insist, "not simply in terms of litigation, land rights and settlements, but also in terms of the languages in which it was constructed." (3)

By no means all of the ten essays that follow actually match the theoretical flash implied by these editorial formulations, which is not to say that the essays lack value or interest. John Gillingham's modest yet substantial "The English Invasion of Ireland," for example, makes the point that the development of a sense of Englishness by contrast with various alien others really begins with the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the twelfth century, and that the works of Giraldus Cambrensis from the 1180s already contain the essential denigrating distinctions that would become the stock-in-

trade of the "New English" of the sixteenth century, the Tudor bureaucrats sent out to subdue and civilize what was conceived of as the Irish wasteland. Sheila T. Cavanagh's "'The Fatal Destiny of That Land': Elizabethan Views of Ireland" discusses with great clarity features of Irish culture, such as "eccentric" systems of land tenure that particularly unsettled English views of stable hierarchy. Hiram Morgan's "Tom Lee: The Posing Peacemaker" is little more than a long and highly circumstantial narrative of an opportunistic second son who overcame the pall of his father's enthusiastic support for Queen Mary to pursue a not-altogether-principled career in various Irish posts. A more consequential look at a single figure is Andrew Hadfield's "Translating the Reformation: John Bale's Irish *Vocacyon*," which argues persuasively for the centrality of Bale's work in forming the English view of the Irish as incorrigible in their stubborn clinging to Roman Catholicism.

More or less at the center of this collection lie three essays by Lisa Jardine, David J. Baker, and Julia Reinhard-Lupton that really do engage the problem of representation. All three recognize, for one thing, the complexity and recalcitrance of what is represented and the consequent uneasiness of those who would go about to represent it. The chief embarrassment facing colonial schemes and utopian visions of Ireland, they realize, was the Irish, and Baker in particular, in "Off the Map: Charting Uncertainty in Renaissance Ireland," has presented evidence of Gaelic energy, volatility, and truculence that made the imposition of stable categories — cartographic and otherwise — sometimes comically problematic. "English mapping," he argues, "was not a one-sided affair, but a complex attempt to create coherence in a space populated