
Patrick Cheney and Anne Lake Prescott, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Shorter Elizabethan Poetry*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2000. 331p.

AUDREY BECKER
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

"For many undergraduates," writes Patricia Fumerton, "the high Elizabethan lyric exists in a social vacuum — as so many fancy poems about love that seem to be saying little in a whole lot of impenetrably highfalutin, conventional language" ("New Historicism and the Cultural Aesthetics of the High Elizabethan Lyric" 161). Clark Hulse similarly observes, "[Elizabethan] poetry is audible primarily as a voice straining to reach students through tiny cracks in a cultural wall.... This literature does not seem immediately recognizable to them as a central component of mainstream culture ... that has shaped their lives" ("Elizabethan Poetry in the Postmodern Classroom" 72).

Caveats like these are echoed repeatedly throughout *Approaches to Teaching Shorter Elizabethan Poetry*, the Modern Language Association's comprehensive collection aimed at the specialist and non-specialist alike. With earnest calls to demystify the poems, the collection offers numerous antidotes to the perceived inaccessibility of Elizabethan verse.

Consistent with the eminently useful *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series, which offers an ever-expanding catalogue of pedagogical resources, this new edition on shorter Elizabethan poetry will prove to be an invaluable source of practical approaches to teaching the material. The volume covers verse by a good range of authors — such as Thomas Campion, John Donne, Michael Drayton, Elizabeth I, George Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Walter Raleigh, Mary Sidney, Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Mary Wroth, and Thomas Wyatt — making it a useful tool for teaching a survey poetry course, a standard course on Renaissance literature, or for more specialized courses involving Elizabethan poets.

Editors Patrick Cheney and Anne Lake Prescott have compiled an impressive array of information on and essays about their topic — although Prescott endearingly laments, "in Utopia this book would have been much longer and, of course, free" (64). Part One covers materials. Here Cheney introduces us to a tantalizingly rich compendium of available editions of individual poets as well as anthologies. Importantly, given the volume's real-world application, much of the information in this section was culled from colleagues who responded to a questionnaire. The evaluations of the texts, therefore, derive from actual classroom use. (The survey participants are listed in the back of the book). For those readers

without the time to ponder the myriad details of the various editions, the editor concludes the section with his personal suggestions: “Cheney’s Choice,” or “a shorter Elizabethan poetry survival kit,” lists classroom texts, reference works, biographies, histories and background, and critical studies.

Part Two presents us with thirty-seven essays — and not a weak essay among them — that discuss individual approaches to teaching Elizabethan poetry. But don’t skip Prescott’s thoroughly engaging introduction. Reading her brilliantly funny teaching anecdotes reminds me why I demanded so belligerently to be in her Renaissance colloquium when I was an undergraduate at Barnard College: she makes the material accessible to her students with unparalleled wit and sensitivity.

Although Prescott confesses that “the organization of this collection has its own narrative unsettledness” (63), the divisions are ultimately effective and make it easy to locate relevant essays. The categorical divisions are: Teaching Backgrounds; Selected Pedagogical Strategies, Courses, Units, Assignments; Critical and Theoretical Approaches; Teaching Specific Poems and Poets; and, new to the series, Teaching Critical Narratives of the Elizabethan Age.

Among the contributors are Susanne Woods, Peter C. Herman, Mary Ellen Lamb, Margaret P. Hannay, Heather Dubrow, Steven W. May, David Scott Kastan, Janel Mueller, Arthur F. Kinney, Michael Schoenfeldt, and Arthur F. Marotti. The topics of the essays represent an admirable range of practical approaches and theoretical models, from Clare R. Kinney’s “Infinite Riches and Very Little Room: Speeding through Some Sonnets in the Introductory Historical Survey,” to Mario DiGangi’s “Love Is Not (Heterosexual) Love’: Historicizing Sexuality in Elizabethan Poetry.”

The excellence and the variety of approaches will, no doubt, make this volume appeal to a large number of readers. But what will make *Approaches to Teaching Shorter Elizabethan Poetry* virtually indispensable is the fact that, in setting out to instruct the instructor, it fills a regrettably vacant niche.