

Historicising Early Modern Literature and Science: Recent Topics, Trends, and Problems

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How to historicise early modern literature and science? The question has been answered occasionally, if only by example, since at least the nineteenth century, when it was generally (if tacitly) answered: read Shakespeare, quote all things science-y or some declared subset, and discuss them as sprigs on a larger cultural wallpaper of scientific ideas, many now quaintly wrong. Publish.

Now the question of how to historicise these materials is answered more variously, not least because the scope of historicisation is more particular, pinpointing local cultural variants with an ever pointier pin, if often with a concomitantly narrower sense of the cultural point of such studies. Given the predilection in early modern scholarship for the local, the fragment, and the curious survival over the system or master narrative – and based on my selective engagement with the scientific and literary culture of a vast period identified not only as early modern but as late medieval, or post-medieval, or ‘the’ (but which?) Renaissance – I will offer some observations on recent happenings with historicism in the period. After a whirlwind literature review that identifies stand-out themes and approaches, I will outline half a dozen wider habits likely to resonate with work in later periods. This compressed topical literature review appears *sans* citations with the exception of noting two excellent reviews of the state of the art of literature and science studies in relation to early modern England: Carla Mazzio’s recent introduction to the latest ways with “Shakespeare and Science” and Howard Marchitello’s slightly earlier essay on “Science Studies and English Renaissance Literature.”

Recent studies have built on seminal work from the last decade of the twentieth century in order to treat the changing manifestations of social qualities such as the civility and curiosity involved and invoked in discourses of both scientific and literary endeavour. In such work, the figures exhibiting such qualities have less often, lately, been gentlemen *virtuosi* than more conventionally marginal figures such as midwives or radical puritans (especially, it seems, Cotton Mather). Similarly, the study of the material productions and residues of textual culture has directed attention not just to the idea-mongers of early modern literature and science but to the roles played and *poeisis* evinced by artisans, technicians, instruments, and their makers. More broadly, pressure has been put on modes of transmission – the spoken word, print, or manuscript, Latin and vernacular, figurative language and plain speech – and their material formats. Also productive has been a focus off the page and on the staging and spectating of science in Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Restoration theatres, and not just those that featured plays, but ones designed for the demonstration of experimental knowledge. Relationships between science and other non-‘literary’ (in a conservative or conventional sense) but still textual subcultures – such as collecting and antiquarianism—have also extended the field.

Proleptic forms of science fiction have been detected not only in old standbys like More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1624) but in Francis Godwin’s *Man in the Moone* (1638) and the works of Margaret Cavendish. The latter is experiencing a heyday, perhaps because of her uniquely gender- and genre-defying interventions in literature and science. Cavendish may be paired with Aphra Behn

among early modern women who have earned the most attention lately; among men, John Wilkins and Thomas Browne have caught scholarly eyes. Moving from the margins back into range of the canon, *Paradise Lost* remains fruitful for harvesting relations between literature and science, particularly in an ecological light; Shakespeare's *oeuvre* is as unstoppable in this context as any other, with cognitive science the latest window on his works; *The Faerie Queene* remains, as usual, less of a starter. Further afield, transatlantic, trading-post, and colonial focal points and texts have offered rich sites for regarding science as a discursive exchange among peoples, objects, ideas, and values.

The textual remains of mad and bad pre-modern sciences (astrology, alchemy, and their ilk) are regularly analysed for rhetorical dovetailings with more mainstream and emergently 'modern' knowledge-making, with ideas of scientific evolutions evolving from the now extinct conception of the singular Scientific Revolution. Yet the rhetoric of science, particularly that theorised and actuated by proponents of a Baconian-inspired New Science – and especially its oft disavowed but inevitable basis in narrative and trope, but also its increased reliance on number and measure (the latter themselves now conceivable as rhetorical) – remains perpetually ripe for new configurations, not least in the journal *Configurations*. Engagements with Galenic and Paracelsian medicine have decoded representations of health, illness, and the passions on the page and the stage; literal and literary anatomies are equally important for students of the early modern body and body politic. But this example makes clear that, owing to its different disciplinary arrangements, to study literature and science in this period, or even its scholarship, is to encroach on the many other 'ands' (such as 'and medicine') of the interdisciplinary humanities – an encroachment that yields a problem and a potentiality I discuss below.

These topical manifestations highlight some of the larger developments in this field. The broadest development ranges from a quiet disaffiliation from to a winking debunking of some central tenets of what was once known as New Historicism. This is in part simply because everything new is old again, but scholarly fashion aside, some of the excessive earnestness of late twentieth-century rehearsals of episodes of Foucauldian subversion and containment is now more muted and sometimes even repudiated for the master narrative of cultural possibility it helplessly re-inscribes. That said, some early proponents did try valiantly to expose the politics built into conventional critical readings of literary texts in relation to a determining cultural context, and to level the ground that could be played on by *all* forms of textuality – with that term enlarged to encompass any type of cultural production. All this effort was to the good, certainly with respect to the respect afforded to studies that saw literature and science as reciprocally influential. But I have lately sensed a wake of disappointment with the tendency of such scholarship to revert to a binary formulation of text and context, foreground and background, servant and master, even against its own desires. This problem of privileging one source or field over another might have particular resonance in literature and science studies, where the distribution of attention is inevitably a matter for individual argument, but in which it seems important that neither term become merely the explanatory vehicle for the other.

In place of an aging New Historicism has arisen something sometimes referred to as a new formalism, or aestheticism, or philology, and sometimes the particular kind of newness is explicitly declared to be 'historical.' In these cases novelty derives from the contextualised attention brought to such governing considerations as form, aesthetics, and language. Practitioners take pains to characterise their studies as nuanced in response to specific, plastic circumstances, rather than as chases after the

transcendent and universal unities sought by at least a straw-man version of the New Critic. These are meant to be table-turning approaches, resuscitating rather than beating dead horses in order to offer differently-informed work on genre, structure, style, rhetoric, and linguistic artfulness, areas that for some years almost seemed forbidden territory (if a bit too fusty to be quite that).

Also apparent is the burgeoning of what used to be called History of the Book but is now conceived to accommodate texts not confined by spines and covers, thereby ecumenically corralling such things as a scholar's index cards and laboratory notes and even blank pages. Much of this work is guided by a new alertness to artefacts that supplement the works more conventionally taken as objects of literary study and also conventionally taken as lacking a material dimension that really mattered much. Somewhat surprisingly, the theoretical explosion of the definition of 'text' has led to a plethora of archival opportunities that force interpretations of the hard facts of things one can see and touch. The interest in grounding the cultural history of textual practices in material remains may sometimes lead to a newly naïve empiricism or positivism of a sort identified with the 'Old Historicism' of the bad old days, or to thinly theorised data compilation. But there may be an especially significant role for such attention to artefacts in the interfield of literature and science, in which the material and the textual often interrelate in unique and telling ways.

Many early modern scholars seem increasingly to recognise that to be interdisciplinary is not only increasingly necessary, it is also hard work. (It sounds like a rare treat these days to study georgic poetry without also boning up on neoclassical agronomics.) One rationale for some of the developments itemised above – such as a grounding return to what may be salvaged from form, artefacts, and empiricism – might be a growing sense that there is simply "too much to know," as it was aptly put by one scholar of early modern literature and science (Blair). *Too Much To Know*, however, is the title of a book by Ann Blair not about our own intellectual climate, but about sixteenth-century polymathic scholarly culture, with its tight intertwining of literature and science. If scholars then felt overwhelmed by such interdisciplinarity, how are we to cope?

One answer, oddly, may be found in increasingly narrow forms of specialization that may be achieved, not through the simple pairing of literature with something else but by triangulating one's field. The literature review above suggested that much early modern scholarship now appears in such a format: literature and science and religion, or literature and science and politics, or literature and science and travel. This dependence on the copula appears another legacy of New Historicism, since its consultation of the non-canonical textual-cultural cache made 'literature and X' almost a necessary premise; but the ante lately seems to have been upped, with another round of 'and'-ing under way. An alternative to expressing one's particular interdisciplinary recipe as an ungainly triplet is to blend the ingredients, as in Tribble and Sutton's "Cognitive Ecology as a Framework for Shakespearean Studies." But are the resulting mash-ups narrower or broader forms of specialization? And what does the felt need to be not just inter- but *multi*-disciplinary do to solitary scholars braiding together so many threads? Might such expansive specialist tendencies put pressure on humanities scholars to embrace more collaborative research? So far I have not seen overwhelming evidence of a turn to collaboration (that mainstay of scientific method) to underwrite claims to multiple expertises.

One final trend to consider originates with the fact that not everyone agrees that historicising literature and science, or anything else, is necessary. So much has been suggested by Rita Felski in "Context Stinks!", where she suggests that '[t]hough

we cannot as yet speak of a posthistorical school, a multitude of minor mutinies and small-scale revolts are underway' (576). She endorses trans-temporal work that defies what she calls history-in-a-box, the result of what others like her characterise as excessively periodised scholarship. Her approach is less anti-historicist than it is against the *professionalisation* of historicism – the tacit agreement, as among visitors to Las Vegas, that what happened in early modernity should stay in early modernity – and the exclusionary mysticism of its means and ends. Felski is not alone in her desire to see past this way of seeing the past, since she can cite recent calls for 'unhistoricism' from queer theorists as well as "[s]cholars of the Renaissance [who] are reclaiming the term "presentist" as a badge of honour rather than a dismissive jibe, unabashedly confessing their interest in the present-day relevance rather than historical resonance of Shakespeare's plays" (576). Some claims to present relevance might be cynical ways to reach deeper into the few pockets of funding that still remain for the Humanities, but surely there is a continuum between what we caricature as 'historicism' and 'presentism,' and a place on it where both might find due consideration, as in the interfield of literature and science.

Works Cited

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