

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Tom MacFaul, *Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). 275pp. ISBN 978 0 5211 9110 4.**

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*Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England* is the first of two recent books in which Tom MacFaul explores fathers and fatherhood in early modern English literature; the other, *Problem Fathers in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. MacFaul clearly conceived (no pun intended) of the two books as companion volumes, and explains in *Poetry and Paternity* that he will treat each genre separately because poetic works ‘have a voice’ (p. 25). In drama, the sense of voice is complicated by the audience’s consciousness that actors are not real people, the infrequency with which characters in plays make or create anything, and the way characters on the stage tend towards types. Poets, on the other hand, use fatherhood to create distinct and individual poetic voices, to negotiate the changing relations between men and women (intensified, at least for a time, by Elizabeth’s rule), and ‘to reflect on the different spheres into which an individual may invest himself’ (pp. 1–2). The five major poets MacFaul discusses at length—Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Ben Jonson—use fatherhood to respond to these artistic and cultural concerns and, as MacFaul demonstrates, to one another.

MacFaul’s first two chapters explore the changing (and often conflicting) Renaissance ideas about fathers and fatherhood expressed in a range of medical, religious, political, and social works. The first, ‘Presumptive Fathers’, enumerates the ways the concept of paternity was vexed during the period and how its simultaneous familiarity and uncertainty made it an especially powerful vocabulary for poets. MacFaul argues that the role of a

father is fundamentally a ‘position of presumption’, in part because paternity was unverifiable in the period and in part because to act as a father ‘involved taking a role and name that was properly God’s’ (p. 1). Furthermore, though the role of the father had been evolving since the beginning of the Reformation, the nuclear family had not yet been established as the primary, normative social unit in early modern England. Finally, Elizabeth’s status as a childless, unmarried female monarch was an uneasy fit for the supreme patriarchal position in the realm and highlighted the ways in which patriarchy necessarily depends on the participation of women. As MacFaul shows in his second chapter, ‘Uncertain Paternity’, religious and scientific writers were especially eager to find solutions to the more unsettling cultural questions about paternity, but their attempts to do so reflect a shared sense that fatherhood came with risks in addition to rewards. The potential for doubt inherent in paternity is, for MacFaul, precisely what gives it poetic power by offering poets opportunities to transcend such doubt and represent an ideal (or at least better) world.

The five chapters that follow each begin with an individual poet’s use of paternity: Sidney’s cultivation of a childlike persona as a way to fashion Elizabeth as a maternal figure (and, by extension, Fulke Greville’s subsequent poetic ‘rejection of the whole material and maternal world’ (p. 65)); Spenser’s exploration of the proper and improper uses of reproduction in *The Faerie Queene*; Shakespeare’s figuration of artistic production as a ‘perfectly masculine form of generation’ in his non-dramatic verse (p. 130); Donne’s apparent fear of reproduction and, by extension, public poetry; and Jonson’s attempt to situate reproduction and poetry alike within stable, socially sanctioned structures (pp. 188–89). A coda explores Robert Herrick and John Milton’s uses of paternity after Jonson had effectively settled the problems of paternity for most poets, and MacFaul shows that Herrick focuses on specific, earthly fathers while Milton draws heavily upon ‘familial dynamics’ in the characterization of *Paradise Lost* (p. 231). In a particularly graceful flourish, MacFaul concludes by noting that *Paradise Regained* concludes by describing Christ’s departure ‘to his mother’s house private’, reminding us that paternity remains impossible without the participation (however problematic) of women.<sup>1</sup> Having offered a wealth of contextual material in the first two chapters, MacFaul convincingly shows that poets responded to common cultural concerns. As a result, the book’s chapters present an impressively coherent and cohesive historical narrative through the five individual studies.

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, in *Milton: Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 460-512 (Book 4, l. 639).

MacFaul's powerful insights suggest other, related areas of inquiry that could be pursued further. Although MacFaul does not separate poetry and drama as strenuously as his first chapter might lead the reader to expect, one wonders how the anxieties and solutions MacFaul discusses might inform our understanding of other early modern works and authors working in a range of genres. (It seems likely that *Problem Fathers* takes up some of these questions.) Similarly, given that MacFaul himself concludes by asserting, 'The mother cannot ultimately be denied', females of any kind—not only poets but also poetic subjects, readers, collectors, and patrons—are given fairly short shrift throughout the book even as their importance as a group is affirmed over and over. One example of this tendency is the latter of MacFaul's two mentions of Lady Mary Wroth, in which he notes that *Urania* includes a song 'Love, a child, is ever crying', only to dismiss it as insignificant: '[T]his is merely a poetry of statement, condemning the needy folly of love, without her uncle's extraordinary manipulations of voice' (p. 71). It might be productive to explore the substantive differences between Wroth and Sidney's uses of voice and whether Wroth was in fact embracing a different poetic strategy, but MacFaul seems to assume male voices and male readers throughout the book. Finally, MacFaul's emphasis on voice sometimes makes one wish for a fuller exploration of the relationship between an author's poetic personae and lived experiences. For example, MacFaul attributes Donne's embrace of 'rhetorical contraception' (p. 160ff.) to a fear that fatherhood diminished the father, but, puzzlingly, he does not acknowledge Donne's numerous biological offspring or his wife's death in childbirth until more than two-thirds of the way through relevant chapter. Of course, it is hard to fault MacFaul for maintaining a rigorous distinction between the poet and speaker, but the delay in addressing this important part of Donne's biography distracts from an otherwise insightful and nuanced chapter. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the questions it raises, MacFaul's book offers a thorough, engaging, and elegantly structured study of the uses of the language of paternity in early modern verse. His keen insights will be valuable to scholars working in any field of early modern literature.

## Works Cited

- MacFaul, Tom, *Problem Fathers in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).