

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Patricia Phillippy, *Shaping Remembrance from Shakespeare to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). 280 pp. ISBN 978 1 1084 2298 7.

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Books treating a topic as amorphous as ‘remembrance in early modern England’ are destined to be unwieldy. Their object is so wildly overdetermined that it becomes difficult to grasp, not only because remembrance is at the centre of so many essential human practices, from self-identification, to mourning, to nation-building, but also because practices of remembrance in early modern England were shaped by the competing imperatives of various spheres, including the radical and unevenly adopted theology of the Reformation, the demands of public health, the dreams of a nascent museal culture, and fleeting fashions in sculpture, textiles, and painting. Further complicating the field, remembrance constitutes a relation to the past, buries the past to establish the present, and attempts to rebuild what is lost while plaintively acknowledging its loss. With an archive that ties together narrative, affect, ideology, and religion in an inevitably unstable mix, the scholar of ‘remembrance’ comes to seem both heroic and hubristic, exploring a field that is both central to our understanding of early modern culture and far beyond the scope of a single monograph.

Scholars, of course, tend to narrow their focus when dealing with such recalcitrant material, as in Patricia Phillippy’s earlier book *Women, Death, and Literature in Post Reformation England* where she explored the gendered dynamics of mourning in the shadow of Reformation theology. There, Phillippy ultimately concludes that early modern women continued to perform ‘Catholic ritual lament’ in a nominally reformed England while men, more strictly bound by the ascetic imperatives of Reformation theology, came to mourn in a Christian-Stoic mode, eschewing the drama of public spectacle after reformers had

transformed theatrically penitential forms of mourning into examples of heterodox, ineffectual self-indulgence. As in that book, *Shaping Remembrance from Shakespeare to Milton* attends to questions of gender, but Phillippy expands her theoretical reach to include the so-called New Materialism (marked here primarily by a nice engagement with Elizabeth Grosz) and phenomenology (which appears in regular turns to Merleau-Ponty's account of flesh as an interface). The theoretical reorientation is useful in part because it remains subtle if not desultory. The mixture of Grosz and Merleau-Ponty ultimately inspires in Phillippy's book the sort of quickening criticism becoming familiar under the sign of 'historical phenomenology' in works such as Bruce Smith's *The Key of Green*, for instance, or Steven Mullaney's *Reformation of the Emotions*. The success of such a method — attuned to the intransigence and insistence of the material world while striving to imagine lost human experience — might best be understood as a correction of earlier New Historical practice. A preoccupation with discourses and variously agented subjects is here supplemented by a more expansive interest in the affordances of a material world that shapes the people who shape it, and in the innermost lives of these people who are imbricated in the objects they manage. Considering the affective weight of mourning and its ubiquitous paraphernalia in sepulchers, tombs, plaques, and monuments, the mix seems particularly fitting.

The theoretical investments in *Shaping Remembrance* also seem fitting because they complement Phillippy's strengths as a writer and critic. Taking as foundational the assumptions about mourning rites and the Reformation, the book takes a familiar and uncontroversial line that it spells out lucidly in its first pages: '[i]n this period of religious change, the unsettled meanings of sacred sites and artifacts encouraged a new conception of remembrance and, with it, changed relationships between devotional and secular writings, arts, and identities' (p. 2). Striking here, however, is the richness and subtlety of the scholarship that grows from Phillippy's archive, which includes parish churches, family reliquaries, and other storehouses put to work in the name of remembrance and commemoration. The book's first two chapters — among its most engaging and illuminating — show precisely the sort of aesthetic, affective, and political work that might be performed by the accoutrements of mourning, at least in elite circles. Exploring the imperatives of iconophobic Puritan mourning practice in the Montagu family, the chapters work as a diptych, juxtaposing the monument erected by Sir Sidney Montagu following the 1625 death of his three-year-old son with the literary, devotional, and sepulchral work of commemoration undertaken by Lady Elizabeth Montagu and Ann Montagu in the same decade. Following the path laid out in her earlier book on mourning, Phillippy foregrounds

the gendered dynamics of mourning in each case before recognizing the comparable work performed by the mourning Montagus, arguing that we see ‘the Montagu family’s efforts to build their collective legacy ... in the exchanges between surviving texts and between texts and artifacts’ (p. 73). In a time of religious tumult, the traditional features of mourning come to be revalued: no longer interceding in the postmortem life of the dead by requesting prayers of the living, monuments here become “‘signes of remembrance” in order to evade the threat of idolatry’ (p. 35); in such a context, monuments become curiously present-oriented, as Sidney Montagu ties himself and his son into a larger community of male Montagus while Lady Elizabeth establishes (or emphasizes) a community of devoted, creative women who cement their solidarity in death. The richest part of these two chapters is perhaps Phillippy’s reading of Ann Montagu’s MS ‘Letters, Prayers, and Poems’ where she shows how the composition and circulation of the anthology speaks to the collaborative labor and the social effects of the practice of mourning in a desacramentalized mode. Reformed theology intersects with gender to become a poetics here, producing new sorts of poetic objects that require a new sort of readerly practice.

Shaping Remembrance frequently returns to such questions of gender and the artifacts of mourning in a series of engaging chapters. Perhaps ironic for a book that aims to ‘remove monuments from parochial or antiquarian concerns’ (p. i), its strongest writing and analysis draws on the sort of genealogical and institutional concerns that enliven antiquarian practice in the period and now. In Phillippy’s reading of two memorials to Blanche Parry, for instance, we get the story of a self-built monument erected before her death and one established at Westminster after her death by Elizabeth, featuring a poem by Parry’s nephew; these monuments become understandable in *Shaping Remembrance* only once we account for the various networks of filiation and service in which Parry was imbricated during her life as Chief Gentlewoman of the Queen’s Privy Chamber and Keeper of Her Majesty’s Jewels. Here, friendship, collegiality, duty, familial ties, and vocation are all operative as Phillippy thinks through the iconography of Parry’s self-built tomb in Bacton and its textile dressings: the insects appearing in courtly needlework, for instance, reappear on the monument to suggest female and domestic textile labours in a lasting, stony medium. To produce (or read) such a memorial requires a sense of handicraft practices, codes of livery, institutional roles, and familiar traditions of self-commemoration — all decidedly ‘antiquarian concerns’ — and Phillippy’s analysis uses this fertile ground to produce a fascinating reading of women’s self-understanding and self-presentation in the face of death. Against the thoughtful and densely layered significance of her self-constructed Bacton sepulchre, the poem written by a nephew and pegged to Parry’s tomb at

Westminster comes to seem utterly facile, focusing on familiar tropes of idealized femininity and detached from the lifeworld in which Parry lived. *Shaping Remembrance* shines at moments like this one, when Phillippy brings her knowledge of memorial custom, biographical minutiae, and court detail to bear on the sexual politics and lived experience of early modern women.

These readings of monuments are the most engaged and engaging parts of *Shaping Remembrance*, but they only tenuously ground Phillippy's readings of Milton's *Comus* and Shakespeare's late plays. From densely layered critical analyses of monuments — based on impressively robust archival research — *Shaping Remembrance* moves to close readings that feel disarticulated from the more concrete historical work. The book's overall structure here — as Phillippy oscillates between 'historical' and 'literary critical' chapters — ultimately recalls the methodological and rhetorical *legerdemain* that has been a problem for New Historicism since the 1980s. In Phillippy's book, the close readings — while frequently illuminating, engaging, and novel — only relate in the vaguest ways to the tombs she's read, relying on what Fredric Jameson described almost thirty years ago as the 'mere' homologues at the heart of so much New Historical scholarship. Here, we find 'the dazzling heterogeneity of raw materials' being brought to bear on early modern drama (*Postmodernism* 193), though material and properly historical connections between the historical and dramatic nodes are largely difficult to discern. The problem is ironically most evident when Phillippy attempts to spell out the connections between text and commemorative context, as in her discussion of John Tradescant the Elder's collection of curiosities that would become a cornerstone of the Ashmolean's collection after Elias Ashmole's death. From a fascinating story of inheritance, backstabbing, intellectual aspiration, vindictiveness and mendacity, Phillippy ultimately draws a frustratingly general moral that she applies to *Pericles*:

Like the collector, voyager, and tale-teller Tradescant, the poets of *Pericles* — Gower and Cerimon, Shakespeare and Marina — preserve the stories of their passages and convey the rarities recovered from remote places and times to refashion and recreate their native shores, imprinted with the traces of their passing feet (p. 189).

While Tradescant, Cerimon, Shakespeare, Shakespeare's Gower, and Marina collect objects or stories and share them, to suggest that this is the crucial feature of Tradescant's collection or Shakespeare's play — to suggest that we can see the character of Shakespeare's play in new ways when thinking of the singular story of Tradescant's

collection — does a disservice to the richness of Phillippy's historical scholarship. We see this disarticulation of text and context throughout the book. Her reading of *Comus* is, perhaps, the exception that proves the rule when it attends to the tomb of Alice Egerton who played Milton's Lady in the masque: we get a poignant story of loss and social isolation in this tale of an easily ignored tomb, and the story ties neatly into the thematics of *Comus*, but even here the excellent close reading relates indirectly to the dramatic work at hand.

To say that the critical close readings are disarticulated from the deep archival research is not, of course, to say that those readings are weak. The opposite is true. Phillippy's readings of *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *Cymbeline* are lively and frequently eye-opening. The strongest of these close readings is, perhaps, her account of 'marmorization' in *The Winter's Tale* and *Comus*, not least because this section most clearly speaks to her interest in phenomenology, the mutual imbrication of subjects and objects, and articulations of gender in a reformed theology. Here, she argues, 'marmorization' — as in the statue of Hermione or the stony imprisonment of Milton's Lady — figures the problematic mirroring of the body in matter, and one version of this fusion is the sexual commingling and coupling, chaste or unchaste, of bodies. Sabrina's touch [in *Comus*] melts the 'gums of glutenous heat' fusing the Lady to marble, releasing her from Comus's threat of unchastity and redeeming her from the living death that this degraded state, for seventeenth-century women, would imply (pp. 218–19). Such subtle, clear, and nuanced readings appear regularly in the literary critical sections of Phillippy's book, though they jostle awkwardly against the deeper historical engagements.

This disjunction of 'text' and 'context' is perhaps clearest when one considers the book's title and its implicit promises. While *Shaping Remembrance from Shakespeare to Milton* implies a historical trajectory — as if Shakespeare and Milton were two crucial waypoints in a history of commemorative practice in early modern England — the book fails to make clear what 'Shakespeare' and 'Milton' actually signify in historical terms, and specifically in relation to the archive of monuments that the rest of the work explores. Does 'late Shakespeare' speak to the gradual decay of the Elizabethan settlement in the early 1600s? Does 'Milton' signify the ascent of more radical forms of Protestant theology in the 1640s? And why are the late romances particularly crucial to our understanding of commemoration, either in the period or in Shakespeare's *corpus* more broadly? And what sort of claims can *Shaping Remembrance* make about Milton and commemoration, say, when it fails to mention *Lycidas* or 'On Shakespeare', two poems that are far more

obviously interested than *Comus* in the questions of mourning, commemoration, and memory? ('What needs my Shakespeare', Milton asks, 'for his honored bones, / The labor of an age in pilèd stones, / Or that his hallowed relics should be hid / Under a star-ypointing pyramid?' [1-4]) The problems here are likely more institutional and disciplinary than intellectual: Phillippy's fascinating historical research needs for various reasons to be tied into the sort of marketable project that 'Shakespeare to Milton' suggests, and these imperatives ultimately require a book that serves two distinct ends.

Considering the apparent doubleness of the book, we can, I think, best approach it as one of the *wunderkammern* that Phillippy describes with such precision in her fourth chapter. Citing Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park's seminal *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Phillippy reminds us as she discusses Tradescant's 'Ark' that collections of curiosities and *wunderkammern* 'were not assembled by chance or caprice ... [but] belonged to recognizable genres and were linked by hidden assumptions and aims' (p. 131). The hidden assumptions and aims tying together the chapters of *Shaping Remembrance* may be less than clear, but what remains clear is that the book as a whole offers an impressive if impressionistic account of the unwieldy culture of commemoration in early modern England. In this work, we have a series of leitmotifs — mourning, loss, collection, remembrance, forgetting, curation — that echo one another in frequently surprising ways as they are juxtaposed, ultimately providing an important contribution to the study of a fraught memorial culture in the period.

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