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Alexander, Gavin, Emma Gilby, and Alexander Marr, eds. The Places of Early Modern Criticism

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[See table of contents](#)

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Alexander, Gavin, Emma Gilby, and Alexander Marr, eds.

The Places of Early Modern Criticism.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 304. ISBN 9780198834687 (hardcover) £70.

In the Preface, editors Gavin Alexander, Emma Gilby, and Alexander Marr frame their essays in an outstanding collection on the places of early modern criticism, succinctly and effectively. They ask what is criticism and where to find it; they see the irony that *krinein* involves separation and distinction while early modern practices vary and blur disciplines, aim, method, and location—literature and the visual arts being in many places: defences, apologies, praises, *paragoni*, prefaces, dedicatory epistles, commendatory verses, letters, essays, commentaries, editions, notes, commonplace books, emblems, paintings, sculptures, built spaces, the onstage audience of the play-within-a play (v; see also 3). Criticism is situated between discipline and methods and borrows “structure, terminology, and taxonomy from rhetoric and logic, for example, or using the analogy of one art to think about another, as when Renaissance literary theorists build on a long tradition (it is there in Aristotle, and in Homer) of thinking about the visual arts in order to think about poetry, fiction, and mimesis” (v). The editors also note that critical methods and ideas circulate among England, Italy, France, and the Netherlands and take root at court, Inns of Court, great houses, theatres, printers’ shops, schools, universities, and libraries.

They also state that criticism was transplanted to the New World and that commonplaces of classical poetics and rhetoric—such as “decorum, speaking pictures, verisimilitude, nature and art, necessity and probability, wonder”—connect and measure the space between various critical discourses (v). Moreover, they maintain that to trace the history of thinking about literature and the visual arts in the Renaissance requires thought about different kinds of place “material, textual, geographical—and the practices particular to those places” (v). For the editors, this work needs to be done because many critics, art historians, and literary historians are reluctant to have full engagement with Renaissance thinking about the materials they study (v).

This is criticism as cultural materialism, as Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore called it, but it represents new considerations of material culture that also differ from cultural poetics or new historicism while sharing some features. Other scholars look at the material nature of art history in terms of Renaissance

art, such as Leo Steinberg, and of early modern history and interpretation, like Anthony Grafton, so while the claim that many may be reluctant to engage with the materials of thinking might be true, there are some important scholars who have long had such engagement. The comparative collection is significant for its reassessment of criticism in its variety and various places of the visual and verbal arts in Britain, the Continent, and the New World.

In the Introduction, Gavin Alexander and Emma Gilby, with substantial contributions from Alexander Marr, note that “criticism” as a term stabilized in the late seventeenth century; before that, “critics” were, among other things, called “*amateur, liefhebber, curiosus, cognoscento, virtuoso, sages, gens d’esprit, esprits forts*,” although the ancient Greeks used the word (2; see also 3–4). The editors say that the volume examines the scope of criticism and its margins while exploring disciplinary methods and critical practices by looking into their history (21). Chris Stamatakis argues that the lyric poetry of the 1530s and 1540s, of Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, and anonymous Henrician poets, represents a nascent poetics in the poems (22–37). Katie Chenoweth discusses Jacques Peletier du Mans—member of the Pléiade, poet, mathematician, translator, and critic—and examines Peletier’s Horatian aesthetics and his work as a corrector in a printing shop, being skilful in avoiding error and being a reformer of French orthography. Chenoweth suggests that metapoetics in France was part of an emerging culture of correction in practices, technological and intellectual, in the shop (38–52).

For Francesco Lucili, erudite interpreters and popular rewriters practised criticism with similar responses to Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* and the hermeneutic issues that it brings up across the different literary kinds, thereby identifying a shared critical view of the poem and comparing the strategies employed in coming to terms with ambiguous elements (53–64). Rowan Cerys Tomlinson explores the role of the circle of learning in humanist neo-Latin and vernacular verse and prose on poetics in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy and France, and does so in terms of Renaissance appropriations of the encyclopaedia, the matter of poetic competence and commonplaces, and the circle of learning in Neoplatonic and Horatian approaches to poetics (65–80). According to Gavin Alexander, discussing George Gascoigne and others, grammar is crucial in literary and textual criticism and in enabling a theory of English versification to be developed; the historical study of early modern English versification neglected grammar and misrepresented the origins and nature of

English metrical accent (81–96). Lorna Hutson argues that Shakespeare's plays represent events that seem, to reader and audience, to derive from places and times beyond the action (97–111). Next, Michael Hetherington discusses form in terms of critical insight, roots in logic and philosophy, and the vexed and lively place between abstract words and the literary phenomena (112–24).

In the context of poetry in the Spanish New World, Rodrigo Cacho Casal analyzes editorial and rhetorical strategies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to place poems in connection with Graeco-Roman and European literary canons (125–44). Elizabeth Scott-Baumann argues that if we look in the right places, we can discover women writing criticism; in considering Anne Southwell and her devotional criticism, she explores gender politics (145–57). For Stijn Bussels, the laudatory poems by Huygens, Vondel, and Meyster on the Town Hall in Amsterdam (1655) combine Graeco-Roman wonder and theological fear of God to help the reader understand the impact of art and architecture (158–75).

Looking at salon poetry and Blaise Pascal's *Lettres provinciales*, Emma Gilby examines early modern French criticism by analyzing references to *présence d'esprit* (176–90). Rather than accept the story of Nicolas Boileau as the vessel bringing Longinus and the sublime to England, Micha Lazarus tells another tale from neglected places, from schoolroom to pulpit (191–205). Thijs Weststeijn reconstructs art criticism in and around Rembrandt's studio by exploring Franciscus Junius's treatise *The Painting of the Ancients* (1639; Dutch 1641) and Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (1678), and by emphasizing the performance of painter and viewer (206–18). Sophie Read investigates a trope of coinage—related to trade, empire, and currency—in an early professional critic, John Dryden (219–31). Alexander Marr relocates the focus of the transformation of genius from England/Germany to France, from literature to visual art, and to the last decades of the seventeenth century, through Roger de Piles and his account of Rubens's brilliance, which included a notion of *sentiment* (232–50). This wide-ranging collection enriches and extends our understanding of criticism: ancient, Renaissance, and contemporary.

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