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### Sherman, Anita Gilman. Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt

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**Sherman, Anita Gilman.**

***Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. ix, 270. ISBN 978-1-108-84266-2 (hardcover) \$117.95.

The study of skepticism in intellectual and literary culture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is certainly a well-trodden critical path, but in *Skepticism and Early Modern English Literature*, Anita Gilman Sherman argues persuasively that that path may be somewhat too narrow. Existing discussions of the subject focus generally on a single author or genre, or on the sixteenth-century revival of the debate between Pyrrhonic and Academic skepticism, or on skeptical thought as an ancillary element in the development of broader historical phenomena, notably the secularization of the social and political spheres. Most significantly, much of the current critical literature is preoccupied with the notion of skeptical thinking as arriving at (or originating from) a position of radical doubt, which can occasionally itself become a source of intellectual paralysis or existential despair. This focus on relentless questioning occludes or neglects the remarkable precipitate of skeptical thought, such as a fascination with the possibilities of language and aesthetics, and the capacity to consider a wide range of social and political perspectives. Integrating a considerable amount of interdisciplinary critical commentary drawn from philosophy, intellectual and political history, and religious and literary studies, Sherman argues for a “holistic approach to skeptical art” (4). Such an approach would suggest skepticism as intelligible not simply as a designation for specific habits of thought, but as an intellectual context that helps to enable a variety of aesthetic and philosophical possibilities. In Sherman’s view, this understanding of skepticism is compatible with faith as well as with the secularizing impulse, aware of its debt to medieval as well as to Classical philosophy, and open to the enjoyment of superficial as well as substantive pleasures.

The book applies its broadened understanding of skepticism in its first chapter, which examines Spenser’s interest in visual and linguistic art as a source of difficult-to-capture and potentially inarticulable aesthetic beauty and philosophical clarity. Focusing especially on the fascination with visionary experiences in his poetry and his translation of Du Bellay, Sherman suggests that the most relevant philosophical context for these inquiries is found in the claims

of fifteenth-century nominalism (and notably its interest in unspoken figures of the mind) rather than in Neoplatonism, a tradition with which Spenser is more typically associated. Like Spenser, Marvell has for some time been discussed as a writer whose interest in skepticism is crucial to his poetry, yet for Sherman this interest does not produce despair or resignation or detachment. Even as one general characteristic of late seventeenth-century skepticism is a retreat to the mind as a private space and a corresponding suspicion of the world of the senses, Sherman finds that Marvell's skeptical position generates the opposite effect in his poetry: one of enchantment, and one of genuine joy in the act of aesthetic production and contemplation of the sublime.

Skepticism also, for Sherman, provides a useful context for literary examinations of the political and social as well as of the literary and aesthetic ideal. Lord Herbert of Cherbury's almost relentlessly anti-skeptical *De veritate* lays philosophical groundwork for the structure of and for the participation in a flourishing commonwealth, one premised not on continual questioning but on the acceptance of a series of crucial principles. Yet, as the trajectories of Herbert's life and other writings indicate, the political/philosophical system envisioned in *De veritate* proved difficult to realize, leading him to occupy a stance of political neutrality by the end of his life. His resistance to the notion of skeptical doubt had led him, remarkably, to an uncommitted, fundamentally skeptical political position. Like Herbert, Margaret Cavendish regarded the political and intellectual landscape of the mid-seventeenth century with some trepidation. Suspicious of the ambitious claims of empiricism yet simultaneously aware of the limitations of older intellectual and aesthetic traditions, Cavendish's writing adopts a form of what Hans Blumenberg refers to as "reoccupation." In discussions of *Nature's Pictures* and especially of *The Blazing World*, Sherman demonstrates ways in which Cavendish repurposes well-known narrative strategies and poetic figures in order to gesture towards the possibility of new approaches to philosophical and political understanding.

The book's broadened understanding of skepticism is one of its great strengths, though there are some accompanying limitations. To consider a skeptical disposition as encompassing not just an approach to epistemology but the intellectual and aesthetic effects of that approach risks creating too diffuse a discursive field. In the chapters on Spenser and Cavendish, for example, it is not always clear how the literary phenomena the book examines are the products of skeptical thought, rather than of Spenser's interest in medieval

literature and philosophy or of Cavendish's critique of humanism. But it is also the case that this expanded definition suggests wider complementarity with other habits of thought. One of the book's prominent themes concerns the degree to which skeptically influenced literature negotiates the relationship between the historical and the ideal. Consistently in the texts studied here, the historical is acknowledged often in terms of its various limitations, while the aesthetic realm is a subject of fascination for its endless potential. Especially in the chapters on Herbert and Marvell, and in the short afterword on *Samson Agonistes*, Sherman's skeptical artists somewhat surprisingly resemble proto-Wordsworthian Romantics in their regard for studious or creative retirement, their devotion to the creative imagination, and, in the cases of Marvell and Milton particularly, their contemplation of the sublime. It is a testament to this book's considerable achievement that its expanded (if diffuse) account of early modern skepticism not only delivers new readings of key texts but also encourages us to reconsider long-held assumptions about the constitution of literary and intellectual traditions.

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