

English Studies in Canada



Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson. *Besieged: Early Modern British Siege Literature, 1642–1722*

Su Fang Ng

Volume 47, Number 4, December 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112749ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932543>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (print)

1913-4835 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ng, S. (2021). Review of [Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson. *Besieged: Early Modern British Siege Literature, 1642–1722*]. *English Studies in Canada*, 47(4), 149–151. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932543>

Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson. *Besieged: Early Modern British Siege Literature, 1642–1722*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2021. x + 324 pp.

Alker and Nelson's *Besieged* is a welcome addition to studies of literatures of the English civil wars. Their distinctive focus on siege literature introduces the reader to an important but overlooked subtopic of war literature. Their contention is that the experience of siege during the English civil wars made the siege motif newly potent and in turn transformed ideas of urban space. They argue that the siege was a liminal space of change, adaptation, and potential for futurity. Canvassing a wide range of works by canonical and lesser-known authors, giving a practical survey of the field, the authors' methodical approach makes sense of the bewilderingly complex variety of works by identifying shared underlying features.

The introduction makes excellent use of theories of space to think about how siege literature urban vulnerability, which in turn demythologized heroism and called authority into question and thus gradually moved from heroic representations of leaders to focus on the besieged people, shifting from noble figures to commoners like engineers, civilians, and others. Chapter one detects in the non-literary genres of diaries, letters, and memoirs, to greater or lesser extent, a triad of discourses of fact or tactics, feeling, and fractured networks or disrupted commerce. The diaries may well be too individuated to be easily summarized, but the authors make a valiant effort to organize this heterogeneous body of material. The chapter concludes with Daniel Defoe's portrayal of the besieged city, which in invoking the competing modes of the tactical and the affective, privileges the city as a space of interrelations.

The next two chapters focus on drama. Chapter two considers how Shakespeare's anti-heroic representation of sieges showing war's traumatic effects in *Troilus and Cressida*, which intertwines the siege with a romance plot, is taken up by William Davenant in *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) and John Dryden in *The Conquest of Granada* (1670–71). Both highlight the city as a vulnerable space subject to violence and death, but while Davenant emphasizes the environment's materiality and the collaboration of leaders and citizens, Dryden focuses on the "relationality of space" (86), whereby space is contingent to being remade, which in turn undermines cohesion and communality. Chapter three continues to survey Restoration siege drama, examining authors as varied as John Crowne, John Banks, Thomas Southerne, and John Hughes. These imitators of Davenant and Dryden increasingly underline the importance of communal war efforts over indi-

vidual heroism and turn away from kings and nobles to celebrate city leaders. Two last works discussed, Richard Ames's *The Siege and Surrender of Mons* (1691) and John Mitchelburne's *Ireland Preserv'd: or, the Siege of London-Derry* (1705), which Alker and Nelson term "docudrama" (141), anticipate the modern documentary in trying to capture what happened.

The following two chapters turn to poetry. Chapter four, focusing on ballads, identify five recurring characteristics: reporting news; encouraging the audience to join the song of "prayer, praise, or bravado" (163); representing the war as a conflict between right and wrong; memorializing heroic individuals; and imagining the enemy's destruction. As these generalities show, the large corpus makes it a difficult subject to treat, which may be why the chapter is organized around specific sieges rather than conceptually. Chapter five examines elevated poetic forms, focusing on three long poems with "epic ambition" by Abraham Cowley, the anonymous W.C., and Joseph Aickin. These authors struggle to sustain the heroic ideal, emphasizing instead the fear, horror, and brutality of war. Finally, the chapter ends with siege poems that turn completely away from the heroic to inhabit an explicitly satiric mode, deflating any military pretensions.

Chapter six, treating prose fiction, argues that siege journalism left a mark on John Bunyan's *The Holy War* (1682). It identifies a shift in this work of spiritual allegory toward the documentary, or "embryonic journalism" (238), with elements such as the eyewitness testimony or the documentary supplement and the evocation of the tangible, sensory experience of war. This new and potent way of reading Holy War makes a strong case for siege's centrality in early modern literature. Finally, a short epilogue briefly considers the siege in contemporary culture.

Alker and Nelson survey an impressive range of materials in their taxonomy of the literary motif of the siege. The sheer amount of material makes this a difficult task, but their analysis creates impressive order out of variety. As a study of motif, however, *Besieged* pays scant attention to historical context despite the topic's close connection to historical events. Several historical sieges are alluded to but not considered in any depth, as the book keeps its focus on the motif's literary evolution. Given the centrality of spatial theories in the introduction, one might have expected some attention to the pragmatic execution of sieges, the spatial representation of sieges in maps and cartography, and how such spatial visualizations might have influenced literary representation. Instead, the concept of space gradually fades away as the chapters progress. A surprising omission is the category of military genres related to sieges, namely siege pamphlets, military handbooks, treatises on fortifications, and maps and cartographic

reportage (and spatialization) of sieges. Moreover, the choice to limit the study to the civil wars period and after means that the English experience of siege warfare on the continent, particularly in the sieges of the Dutch wars of independence, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, is also not included, even though those experiences constituted some of the defining early experiences of siege warfare for the English in the early modern period, not only for English soldiers involved in the war against Spain but also for the English at home reading siege pamphlets. Nonetheless, Alker and Nelson rightly call our attention to the siege as a literary topic of enduring significance. Their book invites us to rethink war literature and opens new avenues for research.

Su Fang Ng
Virginia Tech

Rita Bode, Lesley D. Clement, E. Holly Pike, and Margaret Steffler, eds. *Children and Childhoods in L.M. Montgomery: Continuing Conversations*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2022. 338 pp.
\$140.00 / \$39.95 (pb).

This collection of twelve scholarly studies and four original writings on beloved Canadian author L.M. Montgomery is a *tour de force*, adding to the wonderful array of scholarly criticism on Montgomery in the McGill-Queen's University Press stable. The word "converse," derived from the Latin *conversari*, "keep company (with)," and the Late Middle English *converse*, to "live among, be familiar with," as the leitmotif of this volume is very apt. All the authors have indeed kept company with Montgomery, as evidenced in their empathetic and superbly meticulous analyses of the dialogues between Montgomery and her younger self, her present and her past, and Montgomery and her own reading, as well as the dialogues of other authors with her. Fans of *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* and their sequels will find their favourites well covered. The collection also adds to awareness around other Montgomery novels, especially the previously understudied *Magic for Marigold*. Several chapters trace how other writers have reacted to Montgomery's characters and ideas and responded to them in their own creations and characters. Chapters on anime, fanfiction, and adaptation for television are also included. The "Afterlives" offer unique direct short conversations where creative artists show such conversations in action.