

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



MacFaul, Tom. Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson

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Volume 34, Number 3, Summer 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106369ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i3.17042>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Celovsky, L. (2011). Review of [MacFaul, Tom. Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 34(3), 244–246.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i3.17042>

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MacFaul, Tom.

Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. ix, 275. ISBN 978-0-521-19110-4 (hardcover) \$95.

This monograph explores how the poetry of its titular authors fashions these men as both biological and literary fathers. The parallels and tensions evident in these twin conceptions of fatherhood derive from fraught cultural understanding of that gendered role. As laid out in two opening chapters, paternity extended beyond the familiar ideal that figures fatherhood as conveying individual ‘completion’ and guaranteeing social stability. Challenges were posed to patriarchal ideals by the multiple models of paternity on offer (scientific, religious, political, social, and economic). In a “proto-capitalist economy” (48) with changing inheritance laws, for example, investing in biological children was regarded as a risk-taking *choice*. Moreover, a female partner’s potential unreliability could render paternity uncertain or alter progeny through nurture. Queen Elizabeth’s paternalistic yet non-generative power produced yet more complications. And increasing numbers of childless or unmarried men (a fifth of the population) sought to “establish... patriarchal identities in other spheres” (45) even as England’s “explicit ideology of paternalism suggests” a need “to contain... individualism” (50). Yet, as MacFaul demonstrates, these stressful ambiguities offered “flexibility” (2) and alternatives to the conditions of biological reproduction. The authors he studies employ tropes of generativity to dismantle or declare “secure... self-images” (1) and to negotiate whether and how masculine selfhood can be compatible with ties to feminine creative power and social obligation.

Aware of the “tenuous... nature of patrilineally founded identity” (63) in his thwarted role as Leicester’s heir, Sidney imagines Astrophel entrapped as a child in Elizabeth’s courtly nursery. Countering standard readings of gender dynamics in courtly poetry, MacFaul argues that Sidney neither asserts masculine authority nor abjects himself as feminine; rather, he both “mak[es] and unravel[s]... unified identity” (71) when he competes with Elizabeth’s parental abilities—hers political and his poetic—and accommodates Elizabeth’s power by gathering the best of ‘male’ and ‘female’ as a “foundation for the individual self and therefore for the nation” (76). In response, Greville represents the

continued “frustrations of a courtly eroticism that cannot fully mature” (78) in his own sonnets, whereas Spenser fulfills Sidney’s plan in the ‘public’ poetry of *The Faerie Queene*. Here Spenser recuperates feminine potential to obscure paternity, and thereby enables paternal maturity and re-directs creative power toward social stability.

Subsequent poets meditate on paternity as Elizabeth’s power wanes and is displaced by that of James I. For these writers, poetic production and homosocial bonds offer alternatives to biological generation. Even as he encourages the young male beloved to breed in the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare places biological breeding in competition with poetic productivity in a contest that showcases the tensions between individual desires and social obligations even as it allows both to be served. Further, poetic treatment of the beloved’s parentage creates “a paternal vacancy that the poet may fill” (137) with more certainty than a biological father mistrustful of woman could. Connections to potentially faithless women were also “necessary” (148) for Shakespeare, however (Adonis’s perfection is “unnatural” (152), and his rejection of Venus, concomitant with death). Donne likewise resists biological paternity, but privileges death as a means to perfection and avoidance of public participation. In his lyrics, he praises non-procreative sex and partners for their own sake, not for linking private self with public order. To these ends, his lyrics perform “rhetorical contraception” (162) by emphasizing self-sufficiency and metaphorically describing reproduction with disgust and distaste. He thereby preserves reproductive energies—culturally regarded as limited—and in turn his selfhood. A “*private poet*” (160), Donne avoids tropes of poetic progeny and immortality except in his print publications or poems focused on male-male friendship. In this respect, he anticipates Jonson, who recasts Spenser’s ‘public’ concern for the social roles of paternity as exclusively homosocial, making social relations more “natural” (214) and certain than biological paternity. One poem, for example, “uses... generative imagery to bind king, nation and patron together (with the poet not an incidental part of the circle)” (206). In Jonson’s lyrics, feminine connections no longer threaten but, when “health[ily]” (196) “put in [their] place” (188), function as media to foster stable homosocial networks. As professional author, Jonson fashions himself as an “only partially interested father” (195) who guarantees “the bases of community” but lacks a “passionate stake” in them that could diminish his own selfhood as the gender dynamics of Petrarchan lyric impede the integrity of his predecessors.

Each chapter of this book is characterized by breathtaking literary range: central texts are placed in the context of full discussions of an author's works as well as in the company of other writers working through the same cultural tensions (such as Raleigh, Phineas Fletcher, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Chapman). A wide-ranging coda arguing that paternal tropes fade in mid-seventeenth-century lyric provocatively invites further investigation. MacFaul's psychoanalytically inflected, scrupulous readings are a further strength—though some (Sidney, Shakespeare) are more revolutionary than others which employ 'paternal-poetic' lenses to put standard arguments in new perspective (such as Jonson's characteristically secure independence or Spenser's harnessing of mysterious feminine creativity and privileging of masculine-feminine 'balance' for 'public' ends). The case made for poetry (unlike prose or drama) having a special "voice" (25) for paternal connections is not so convincing: how similar—as poetry—are Spenser's 'heroic poetry,' Jonson's 'social' verses, and Shakespeare and Sidney's Petrarchan lyrics? And, while two carefully researched and argued opening chapters announce interest in specifically *masculine* roles (versus the feminine creativity examined in previous scholarship), some chapters (Sidney, Jonson) maintain focus on 'masculinity' more than others (Spenser, Donne) that tend toward less gender-specific observations about selfhood or procreation, or whose connections to ideas of masculinity established in the introductory chapters could be more explicitly reinforced. Scholars particularly interested in understanding Renaissance 'masculinity' as flexibly constructed and potentially multiple and unstable will benefit most from this book's foundational chapters and from discussions of Sidney and Jonson.

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