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### Habinek, Lianne. The Subtle Knot: Early Modern English Literature and the Birth of Neuroscience, and Hogan, Sarah. Other Englands: Utopia, Capital, and Empire in an Age of Transition

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**Habinek, Lianne.**

***The Subtle Knot: Early Modern English Literature and the Birth of Neuroscience.***

Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2018. Pp. xv, 283. ISBN 978-0-7735-5318-7 (hardcover) US\$50.

**Hogan, Sarah.**

***Other Englands: Utopia, Capital, and Empire in an Age of Transition.***

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. Pp. x, 256. ISBN 978-1-5036-0516-9 (hardcover) US\$60.

Both of the books under review discuss early modern literature from the perspective of current issues. Lianne Habinek, in *The Subtle Knot*, is interested in early modern accounts of soul and brain; she locates these discussions in the context both of current debates about the relationship between mind and brain and of the current state of conversations between scientists and humanists. Sarah Hogan, in *Other Englands*, is interested in early modern utopias; she locates these descriptions of ideal societies in the context of current models, especially Marxist ones, about the beginnings of capitalism and the extension of English political power in the larger Atlantic world.

The title of Habinek’s *The Subtle Knot* comes, of course, from John Donne’s poem “The Ecstasy,” in which Donne’s speaker imagines that in ourselves body and soul are joined by a “subtle knot, which makes us man.” The overall subject of Habinek’s work is how early modern writers imagined the nature and function of our component parts, the relationships among them, and, especially, the growing identification of the brain as the location for the “subtle knot” that connects our components into the selves that we experience ourselves to be.

Habinek’s argument ranges widely and is richly and densely articulated. Nevertheless, each of her five chapters is devoted to one key metaphor, beginning in chapter 1 with Donne’s subtle knot, for which Habinek finds parallels in the early anatomists’ idea of a *rete mirable*, or “wonderful knot” (37), a specific location in the brain for the point of union between soul and body: a spot, by the way, that turns out to exist only in the anatomists’ imagination and not in the brain, even though early books of human anatomy include images of it as well as specific locations for it. This persistence of the “subtle knot” as a

metaphor for the point of union between body and soul becomes, for Habinek, a validation of the power of language to capture and inform our experience of ourselves.

Chapter 2 combines *Hamlet*'s frequent references to the brain with a discussion of the fact that knowledge of the brain's functioning in living people first came from observations of changes in behaviour after people had suffered (survivable) wounds or lesions to the brain. Habinek believes *Hamlet* is "distinctive in its concern with the brain and with what transpires should that brain be damaged" (69). The poison that Claudius has poured into the king's ear leads Hamlet to inflict on himself a willed wiping of memory; the result is Hamlet's exhibiting behaviour that is a departure from his accustomed demeanor, whether it be an assumed "antic disposition" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.192) or a real "madness" (84).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the use of conception and childbirth as metaphors for creative work. In chapter 3, focusing on the work of William Harvey, Habinek explores male writers' use of the image of the brain as womb. She notes how male writers imagine their creative work as essentially maternal, conceived in the brain and given birth to as a book. She also discusses how male writers imagine pregnant women as susceptible to influences on their brains, resulting in various kinds of imperfection in their children.

In chapter 4, Habinek finds that Margaret Cavendish reclaims the distinctive contributions of women to the creative process, both as writers and as mothers, by celebrating the "generative capability" (28) of the maternal imagination. In opposition to a simple dualism of body and mind, Cavendish imagines the brain as composed of "thinking matter" (29) functioning as a garden whose textual fruits provide both creative opportunities for her readers to think for themselves and recreative possibilities for their "pleasure and diversion" (149).

Habinek's chapter 5 explores the fifth of her key metaphors, that the brain is itself a kind of book. Her focus here is on the history of books that contain anatomical images. She notes that some of these books reveal the persistence over time of demonstrably false ideas about the brain's anatomy. At the same time, she points out how other early modern bookmakers developed increasing skill at depicting the findings of early anatomists through creating "flap anatomies" (160), multi-layered compilations of separate sheets of images that—when unfolded—reveal progressively deeper levels of organs and tissues.

*The Subtle Knot* is important chiefly for Habinek's detailed examinations of the ways her five central metaphors help us understand early modern writers' conceptualizations of how the mind works. For this, we are truly in her debt. That said, her argument has its limits. Chief among them is the way in which she employs the idea of "soul" as, in effect, the equivalent of "mind." Missing here is any sense that "soul" for early modern writers occupied an incredibly rich field of imagining, carrying with it a complex set of metaphors that transcend mere mental activity and raise a wide range of questions about the relationships between the spiritual and the material.

Sarah Hogan's *Other Englands: Utopia, Capital, and Empire in an Age of Transition* also explores a cluster of early modern works in light of present-day concerns among historians, especially Marxists, about the point at which capitalism began to emerge as an economic system. To this, Hogan adds another broad concern: the English decision to join other European nations in colonizing the Americas.

While Habinek looks back to early modern writers for images to understand the relationship between mind and body that were current before the development of modern neuroscience, Hogan looks to their contemporaries for moments when there emerged ideas that fit within Marxist paradigms for the rise of capitalism, the development of class consciousness, and the growth of empire as a national policy. While Habinek ranges over a variety of genres for her sources, Hogan concentrates on one—the utopia—and develops a narrative history of this genre, choosing works from the early sixteenth century to the late years of the seventeenth to focus her discussion. In the process, the definition of this genre broadens from works like More's *Utopia*, in which we get a description of a fictional world claimed to be an ideal alternative to reality, to include works like Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, which proposes changes in English policy toward Ireland that, we are promised, if implemented, will make a real country into an ideal country.

Hogan's chapter 1 deals, of course, with More's *Utopia* itself. Here, More's narrator's account of his conversations with the well-travelled Raphael Hythloday, which leads to Hythloday's description of his visit to the isle of *Utopia*, is reconceived as a work that "gives testimony to proto-capitalism's imperial underpinnings" (24). Hogan demonstrates the "class-coded character construction" of figures we meet in book 1 of *Utopia*, as well as More's reconceptualizing of "the social in broadening geopolitical frameworks" (23).

Hogan's chapter 2 addresses Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, which, like the *Utopia*, is an island, here named Bensalem, which Hogan interprets as a "fantasy of empire where natural knowledge becomes a vehicle for and a product of mercantile exploitation" (78). The leaders of Bensalem exist as "a vanguard elite" who understand exploitation of other lands and peoples as "progress." Hence, the *New Atlantis* is "a geopolitical allegory for the historical changes ushered in by the global expansion of markets under capitalist relations in the seventeenth century" (91).

Subsequent chapters of *Other Englands* expand what Hogan calls the "early English utopian imaginary" (24) to include works not customarily included within the utopian genre. What these works have in common is their imagining a place that is "not yet," while claiming that the place that is—namely, the real England, or a neighbour (specifically, Ireland)—can become this imagined ideal place if only the narrator's plans were carried out.

Toward this end, Hogan's chapter 3 discusses Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, a work usually regarded by students of Spenser with dismay because of its advocacy of violent repression as the means by which England can, finally, take real control of Ireland. Hogan, however, argues that Spenser also imagines an Ireland in which English management of its occupation, enforced by violence if necessary, has led to economic prosperity for both the Irish and their English occupiers. Hogan then turns to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, reinterpreting it in economic terms, so that the allegory—especially in the later books—can be construed to "morally differentiate English methods of land expropriation from [Spanish] imperial practices and customary economic relations" (25).

Chapter 4 turns to the works of two women writers of the early modern period—Isabella Whitney and Amelia Lanyer—who, according to Hogan, grant "mourning, loss, and women writers a place in the utopian tradition" (25), since their "discourses of death and dispossession in women's topographical verse gesture toward utopia in its absence" (25). Whitney's "Wyll and Testament" imagines a more ideal London while her narrator is being banished from the real one; Lanyer's "Description of Cooke-ham" envisions the English country estate as, potentially, a kind of utopia of female community, but from her position as a marginal member of that community.

Hogan's final chapter treats two works of the English Civil War period: Gabriel Platte's *Macarina* and John Milton's *Areopagitica*. Hogan sees Platte's

work as affirming the value of land cultivation, thus becoming an early defender of free trade; in Hogan's view, Milton's *Areopagitica* anticipates a "bourgeois call for innovation, dynamism, and labor" and endorses "a commercial society" (26).

Both these works are, in my view, more convincing for their discussions of individual works than they are for the larger concerns they seek to address. Habinek's goal of addressing the divisions between scientists and humanists seems to disappear as her work progresses; Hogan's larger argument always seems already predetermined by her commitment to Marxist theories of history. Nonetheless, in their explications of individual works, they invariably call my attention to things I had never considered before. For this I am grateful. In my view, these are two strong books from two scholars at the beginning of their careers. If their reach exceeds their grasp in these books, well, then, we have much to look forward to as their careers develop.

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**Hirstein, James, éd.**

***Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547) et une réforme de l'Eglise : Engagement et changement. Actes du colloque international tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 5 au 6 juin 2015.***

Turnhout : Brepols ; 2018, iv, 561 p. + 7 ill. ISBN 978-2-503-57919-1 (relié) 110 €.

Fruit d'un colloque international tenu à Sélestat et à Strasbourg en juin 2015, ce volume propose seize articles sur la figure de Beatus Rhenanus, l'humaniste ami d'Erasmus et lecteur attentif de Luther qui se distingua autant par sa discrétion que par la profondeur de ses connaissances philologiques. James Hirstein, spécialiste et éditeur de Rhenanus, présente, en guise d'introduction au volume, une relecture critique de deux articles importants de W. Teichmann et de R. Walter portant sur la biographie de Beatus, et sur le vif intérêt que lui inspirèrent les écrits de Martin Luther à partir d'environ 1518. Ce premier objet d'étude oriente la matière du volume entier, sans constituer pour autant un véritable appel programmatique. Hirstein soutient l'idée selon laquelle