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### Zajac, Paul Joseph. Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature: Reforming Contentment

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**Zajac, Paul Joseph.**

***Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature: Reforming Contentment.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 230. ISBN 978-1-009-27166-0 (hardcover) US\$110.

In this solidly researched and well-argued monograph, Paul Joseph Zajac undertakes a re-evaluation of the humble genre of pastoral in English Renaissance literature. Grounded in the classical and Christian traditions of contentment discourse and informed by contemporary affect theorists such as Teresa Brennan, Zajac positions his study beyond both the idealizing perspectives on the pastoral forwarded by earlier modern critics such as Renato Poggioli and later, cynical and political, takes on the genre influenced by Louis Montrose's influential New Historicist readings of English Renaissance pastoral in the 1980s. Zajac argues that if, according to Poggioli, pastoral is a kind of "enlightened hedonism" that "exalts the pauper's estate [...] because it teaches self contentment" (12), then, according to Montrose, "[p]astorals that celebrate the ideal of content function to articulate—and thereby, perhaps, to assuage—*discontent*" (11). Zajac seeks to move beyond these two critical positions and the largely passive intellectual and ideological roles that they afford the pastoral. While acknowledging that many recent studies of the genre have been skeptical if not critical of Montrose's position, Zajac contends that "they have not challenged his account of pastoral contentation. In the name of historicizing pastoral, literary critics in the past four decades have walled off a historical conversation in which pastoral played a significant role" (12).

Zajac's study aims to recover that significant role without abandoning the insights that Montrose's and others' analyses have produced. "Rather than recoiling from 'ideological' pastoral criticism and returning to an earlier 'idealistic' model," Zajac states, "I explore the extent to which authors used pastoral alongside other literary modes and traditions to engage with the intellectual and emotional culture of the Reformation" (12). Romance (Sidney and Spenser), drama (Shakespeare), and epic (Milton) are among the literary modes in conjunction with which Zajac examines the pastoral and its discourse of contentment, and the discourse of despair is one of the major elements of Reformation culture that constitutes the backdrop against which Zajac

conducts that examination. "Contentment," Zajac states, "helped to heal the unintended wounds of Reformation, or at least alleviate the pain. Christian contentedness offered an alternative to Calvinistic despair, and many authors pitted the two against each other as they actively played out theories of affective self-fortification in their works" (10).

The phrase "theories of affective self-fortification" might sound slightly anachronistic, but Zajac makes a persuasive case for the applicability of contemporary affect theory to the study of English Renaissance pastoral. Noting that affects as theorized by contemporary affect theorists such as Teresa Brennan are similar to the passions of Galenic medicine, the dominant early modern medical discourse, Zajac argues that "contentment proves a remarkably flexible concept in Reformation discourse, reflecting aspects of what Brennan identifies as self-containment and self-possession. By emphasizing the boundaries of the subject, Renaissance writers could, at times, construct an ideal of contentedness as autonomous selfhood, in which the individual was effectively impervious to outside influences. In this way, contentment became almost a precursor concept to Brennan's self-containment. At the same time, however, authors anatomized contentment's embodied, transactional, and relational nature" (16) in a manner akin to Brennan's notion of self-possession. Following Steven Mullaney's argument in *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) that the Reformation involved fundamental changes to "structures of feeling" (a term forged by Marxist critic Raymond Williams, as Zajac points out; 6), Zajac uses affect theory to analyze the discourse of contentment as the articulation of a complex emergent structure of feeling. Zajac "use[s] affect primarily as an umbrella term to capture the multivalency of contentment as both emotion and emotional principle; as a feeling of pleasure and a resistance to change; as a form of containment and a means of connection; as protecting, producing, and, at times, policing selfhood" (16).

Having briefly outlined in the introduction the classical discourse of contentment in the works of Stoics and Epicureans (but not the Skeptics, for whom *ataraxia* was also a key concept), the monograph's first chapter provides a thorough survey of Christian discourses of contentment, from the Pauline epistles through Luther and other early Reformers to John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* and late 16th-century and 17th-century English sermons and treatises on contentment. Throughout this chapter, Zajac is concerned to

show how the discourse of contentment connects with other discourses, such as medicine and political theory. The second chapter examines Sidney's *Old Arcadia* and *New Arcadia*. This chapter might be said to focus on contentment's embodied nature. If in *The Old Arcadia* "Sidney suggests that sexual desire per se is not problematic for contentedness, despite the problems encountered or created by other desiring individuals" (62), Zajac argues, "*The New Arcadia* is more orthodox [...] [C]ontentment is revealed as an inadequate response to the injustices perpetrated by malcontents" (52).

In the third chapter Zajac focuses on the pastoral elements in Spenser, specifically *Mother Hubbard's Tale* and Books I and VI of *The Faerie Queene*. His analysis here registers the perceived limits of the discourse of contentment. "Throughout his corpus," Zajac concludes, "Spenser depicts contentment as a cultural ideal that may not be fully realized by individuals and that cannot encompass the full range of human experience or literary representation [...] [Spenser] represents a qualified version of content that must coexist with other, more extreme, emotions—even when, Spenser suggests, those emotions may threaten contentment's very existence" (100). The following chapter takes up Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Othello* in order to examine contentment's relational quality. For Shakespeare, Zajac contends, "[c]ontentment is not just a way of comporting oneself, but of interacting with others—in a couple, a commonwealth, or anything in between. The challenges to contentedness are real, but so are its benefits for the individual and the community. However, contentedness loses its utility or becomes discontent when its interpersonal nature is denied" (103).

Zajac's final chapter on Milton's *Eikonoclastes* and *Paradise Lost* is too complex to be summarized adequately here, but it fittingly concludes the monograph by extending the scope of the analysis into the realm of imperialism. Especially strong is Zajac's claim that in *Paradise Lost* "the sinful discontent propagated by Satan introduces a rupture between self and world and precipitates the fall of pastoral. For Milton, the production of postlapsarian psychology coincides with the loss of pastoral content, ultimately giving rise to epic and empire" (128).

On the whole, then, Zajac's examinations of some of the major literary works of the English Renaissance insightfully substantiate the thesis he articulates in the introduction and demonstrate the productive nature of the affect theory he employs. *Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature*

will be essential reading for any scholar interested in the role of affect in the shaping of English Renaissance literature and culture.

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