

Books: Reviews and Notices

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Kezar, Dennis. *Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. vii + 263pp. ISBN 0-19-514295-0. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Jeff Dolven

Dennis Kezar has never gotten over the fact Shakespeare killed Desdemona: who, after all, would have been better able to save her than the playwright? Who wrote her last words, or the words of her murderer, the words of her murder? In his book *Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship* he argues that the rest of us have gotten over this authorial guilt too easily, and moreover that Shakespeare himself never did, nor Skelton nor Milton nor Edmund Spenser. He has written a study of what he calls the "Renaissance killing poem:" poems whose representations of death worry the problem of the responsibility writer and audience assume for the violence they depict and consume. "What does it really mean for Shakespeare to kill for a living?" he asks; "in what ways do poet and audience collaborate in producing a literary death? Where is the distinction

between representational and interpretive killing? Where is the boundary between textual and social violence?" (7). These are dubious, perhaps even embarrassing questions. They are, first of all, absurdly naïve: their challenge to the boundedness of literature is not the now-familiar one of migrating discourses, but an ostensibly childish confusion between fiction and reality. They also imply an Early Modern author who might take this killing personally and to heart, all in spite of the diffusions of authorship by which modern criticism would exonerate him. The strength of Kezar's work lies in crediting such responses, responses we have schooled ourselves to suppress, and pursuing them with a new sophistication in a series of rich, old books.

Those books range widely, from John Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe* to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. In *Phyllyp Sparowe*, the subject of the first chapter, Kezar makes clear that the killing he means is not always literal: "At the most figurative level . . . the killing poem destroys its subject not by representing its death, but by revealing that subject's lack of ownership of its own representation" (15). The "subject" here is not the sparrow Philip but his would-be praiser Jane; Kezar traces how Skelton's usurpation of Jane's

epitaph for her bird, and subsequent turn to praise of the praiser, makes her vulnerable to the interpretive violence of a reading public. "By silencing Jane and subjecting her ambiguous image to the undetermined constructions of the world, Skelton ventures into . . . killing poetry" (48). Skelton's *Replycacion* testifies to the poet's awareness of this peril; together the poems describe an ambivalent investigation of his poetry's power to harm the objects even of its most generous attention.

/ The chapter on Spenser—"Spenser and the Poetics of Indiscretion"—takes up this question of equivocal praise in a reading of Serena's sojourn among the savages in *FQ* VI. A prelude about elegy argues that the Reformation proscription of prayer for departed souls had made biographical representation newly significant: such praise became the new "service of the living to the dead" (53). Kezar is agnostic about the particular ecclesiastical target of the cannibals' "common feast," but reads it as a kind of ersatz funeral service in which prayer and praise are difficult to separate. Serena's vivisection by blazon is evidence of how both can "transform into violent exposure" (62). He takes up the episode's Petrarchan satire to argue that lyric poetry is equally to blame for rendering her "alreadie dead with fearefull fright" (*FQ* 6.8.45); "even the most courteous glance," he

concludes, "can cooperate with the Blatant Beast and anticipate the glancing murder enacted by the savages in their theater-in-the-round" (79). Along the way he invokes Donald Cheney on Petrarchism and Theresa Krier on problems of secrecy and exposure, and with these critics in mind much of the argument may seem familiar to Spenserians. The book's characteristic move—assessing the author's guilt, and the poem's reflection on that guilt—is made mostly by implication: Kezar is hard pressed to cite lines where "the conversion of authorship into scapegoating" (85) emerges as a distinct variety of *FQ*'s general compulsion to criticize its constitutive poetic modes. Greater attention to the figure of Spenser's narrator might have helped put a finer point on "the ethics of authorship."

The next three chapters turn to the stage, placing the argument in the context of English antitheatricalism: anxieties about the killing poem's violent power, Kezar argues, often echo, internalize, and even tacitly acknowledge the justice of attacks by the theater's critics. In "The Property of Shakespeare's Globe" Stephen Gosson's account of "theater as mistrial" (88) offers terms for an analysis of the abuse of representation in *Julius Caesar*. The Roman citizens stand in for the audience as Kezar describes the link between "theatrical

other-fashioning" (101) and murder, culminating in a reading of the death of Cinna at the hands of a crowd that knows it has the wrong man. Chapter 4, "*The Witch of Edmonton* and the Guilt of Possession," reads witchcraft plays in relation to the controversy—seventeenth century and modern—about the persecution and execution of witches. Kezar credits *The Witch of Edmonton* with an awareness not only of "the social guilt that underlies local blame" but also of "the culpability of its own representations" (124). Finally, "Samson's Death by Theater and Milton's Art of Dying," the fifth chapter, treats Milton's unperformable drama as an *ars moriendi*, and argues that it should be read in the context of the "increased scrutiny, even satire, to which the *ars moriendi* conventions were subjected in the late English Renaissance" (141). With the execution of Charles in the background, Kezar describes how the idea of making meaning in the act of dying can become a killing by the act of making meaning. He ultimately takes *Samson Agonistes* to express Milton's second thoughts about the spectacle of regicide.

The final chapter summarizes these arguments by way of brief readings of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the contested "Funeral Elegy" by "W. S.," and Milton's "The Passion." This range represents in little a problem that troubles the whole book over its progress from Skelton to Milton. Its

materials sometimes seem adventitiously chosen; each chapter has its own historicizing project, but the various contexts invoked offer little by way of narrative arc. (Kezar has heard this criticism before: he ends his introduction by saying that "Discontinuity . . . serves an analytical purpose every bit as important as continuity in this study" [16]). Local readings too sometimes strain to uncover the specifically authorial violence (or complicity in violence) that the argument demands. The passing description of how the last sentence of the *Defense of Poetry* "kills . . . with malign neglect" (39), for example, seems misleading both about Sidney's poetics and his tone. (As with so many treatments of metaphorical violence in modern criticism, overstatement is a constant peril.) Moreover the positive content of the "ethics of authorship" which is violated by the killing poem remains largely unexplored; in the absence of such an account, the book's difference from the sizable bibliography on the violence of representation, satire, slander, and so on sometimes blurs. But with that said, there remains a distinctive question behind *Guilty Creatures*, one that is powerful, tenacious and perversely daring. Kezar must be right that Renaissance authors worried that poetry could kill, and that they—and the audiences they brought into being—feared they might

somehow be accountable for the consequences.

Jeff Dolven is an Assistant Professor of English at Princeton University. He has published essays on Spenser and on modern poetry; his article "Spenser and the Troubled Theater" won the Isabel MacCaffrey award in 2000. His poems have appeared in the Paris Review, Yale Review, TLS and elsewhere. He is currently working on a book about the relation between humanist pedagogy and the didactic ambitions of Renaissance romance, tentatively entitled Tales Out of School.

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Schwarz, Kathryn. *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. xv + 284 pp. ISBN 0-8223-2602-7. \$54.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8223-2599-3. \$18.95 paper.

Reviewed by Mary Villeponteaux

In *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance*, Kathryn Schwarz offers a sophisticated, theoretically-informed analysis of the early modern English construction of the Amazon. Though we might expect such transgressive female figures to appear in Renaissance texts as the counter-examples against which normative femininity can be imagined,

Schwarz shows that most of these accounts domesticate the Amazon in one way or another, so that a figure we might expect to violate patriarchy apparently supports it instead. But this is far from the end of the story. One of Schwarz's fundamental insights, reiterated throughout the book, is that these Amazonian narratives unsettle the categories and systems upon which patriarchy relies. "As separatists they [Amazons] are a threat, but as mothers and lovers and wives and queens they are a disaster" (23). The domesticated Amazon is even more dangerous than the oppositional Amazon because her participation in patriarchal organizations reveals "the fragility of absolutist taxonomies" (42). A female who successfully performs masculinity demonstrates that masculinity is indeed a performance rather than an absolute state. The texts that Schwarz examines bear witness to Amazonian danger by depicting patriarchal subject positions (colonialists, kings, princes, dukes, knights) that are destabilized and compromised. Schwarz also suggests that for English Renaissance authors, Amazon dreams become a playing field on which questions of desire—for patronage and conquest, homosexual and heterosexual—are engaged.

Schwarz takes up a number of texts by canonical authors such as Shakespeare, Spenser, Raleigh, Sidney, and Jonson, noting that these authors, whose writing forms the basis of our