

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Alison V. Scott, *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015). viii+238pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 6403 1.

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Current intellectual histories of the idea of ‘luxury’ in Western culture invariably display a markedly progressive bent. They chronicle the successive transformations of the concept as a sort of evolution ‘from classical vice or medieval sin to modern social benefit, and finally to its apotheosis as a marker of distinction in postmodern, capitalist society’ (p. 1). The turning point is generally dated to the eighteenth century, which witnessed a gradual and steady process of de-moralization of luxury. Alison V. Scott regards this evolutionary narrative as unsatisfactory, in that it tends to overlook crucial discontinuities observable in early modern literary engagements with the concept. In *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England* Scott therefore draws into contention the traditional account with a view to demonstrating that the idea of luxury was undergoing significant conceptual disruption and reformulation as early as the seventeenth century.

Although it is indisputable that early uses of the term generally identify luxury with carnal lust, Scott convincingly argues that, far from remaining static until the eighteenth century as is commonly believed, the term gradually acquired manifold shades of meaning as well as more conceptually fluid and dynamic associations a century earlier. More specifically, luxury also started being negotiated in political rather than merely religious terms, in the context of an interactive relation ‘with developing consumerism and commodity culture’ (p. 117) that facilitated a process of expansion and confusion of its conceptual vocabulary. The idea was increasingly deployed in ways diverging from the conventional moral standard, for example ‘in terms of riot, excess, indulgence, rankness, revelry and dissipation, and its disordering effects were applied to diverse situations including mockery of wealth, ill rule, and sedition’ (p. 7).

Since ‘literature works diachronically, simultaneously reproducing and producing ideas’ (p. 10), the author decides to approach early modern luxury primarily through creative and literary works, where the multiple and contested meanings of luxury can

be more clearly seen as dynamically in play — though she often also draws into the discussion dictionaries, pamphlets, sermons and treatises. Among literary works, she privileges ‘mimetic texts, since they are equipped not merely to enact but also to explore and critique’ (p. 8) the uses of the concept. Fully aware of the importance of the dynamically interactive relation between the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of conceptual change and negotiation, she devotes unflinching attention to the lexical aspects of the history of the concept and to the correspondence between linguistic changes and conceptual shifts, with an illuminating selection of examples from the texts considered.

As a consequence of the author’s rejection of a progressive, evolutionary narrative of the idea of luxury, the volume does not unfold in chronological order. The introduction is followed by six chapters ideally divided into three sections dealing, respectively, with the moral, the material and the political-economic linguistic frameworks within which luxury signifies. Chapter one offers a detailed and subtle discussion of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Here, Scott persuasively contends, luxury is understood simultaneously as self-indulgence and concupiscence on the one side and as a ‘failure of Aristotelian moderation and stoic self-containment’ (p. 26) on the other: Spenser basically reformulates the idea of luxury as carnal lust by combining it with the related concepts of excess, indulgence and waste. Scott’s insightful observations conflate different levels of understanding about the complicated negotiations of the concept of luxury in the poem, and this chapter is arguably one of the highlights of the volume: no wonder the article from which it springs received the 2007 Albert W. Fields Award from *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*. In chapter two a historically grounded discussion of the reception of Cleopatra in early modern drama as a figure that ‘conjured a nexus of meanings and associations encompassed in the shifting idea of luxury in early modern England’ (p. 66) interestingly illuminates Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Here, luxury is shown not to be defined in merely moral-religious terms, as it has already started to take on a significant aesthetic and political dimension as a ‘proto-liberal notion of negative liberty in which Cleopatra’s luxury is a sign of commitment to and fulfilment of personal desire’ (p. 82).

Chapter three brings into focus the crucial role of satirical writing (especially by Nashe, Jonson and Marston) in the conceptual redefinition and transformation of luxury, particularly as related to the growth of London, a city that could be seen either as a figure of luxury tempting men to self-indulgence or as a victim of the deformation brought about by luxury. Through a constant recourse to classical philosophy and by highlighting the combined influence of Juvenal and Rabelais on early modern English satire, Scott shows how satirists generally display an ambivalent stance towards luxury as both productive of and produced by the decline of the city: though a moralizing attitude is still deployed, moral judgment and social practice start being disconnected. In chapter four Scott moves to the analysis of Jonson’s city comedies (*The Devil Is An Ass*, *The Alchemist*, *Volpone*) and Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, where consumption

is essentially presented both as a moral problem and as an enabling opportunity, which indicates the instability of the concept of luxury. The various plays considered here are put into a fruitful and fascinating dialogue that allows Scott to uncover hidden shades of meaning and throw new light on ostensibly very well-known texts.

Chapter five further complicates the picture. Here, Scott delves into non-literary texts that provide exceptional insights into the cultural climate of the time. She especially considers mercantile defences of trade in order to show how they exploit various meanings of luxury ‘in order to censure a set of behaviors against which the legitimate trade in and consumption of “moderate” luxury is defined and defended’ (p. 152). In these texts, then, ‘the focus shifts to querying how luxury might be managed within rather than eradicated from the state’ (p. 146). The chapter features an interesting discussion of the delicate operation Jonson carries out in *The Entertainment at Britain’s Bourse* by shifting between praise and scepticism about the New Exchange, while simultaneously implying the possibility ‘that luxury might be profitable in a way that essentially alters the world as it has been previously understood’ (p. 173). Early modern Roman tragedy is the subject of chapter six. In Scott’s opinion, this specific genre ‘reconsidered the threat classical *luxuria* posed to civilization in order to better understand the place of luxury in the rapidly changing political world of early modern England’ (p. 182). The author considers in detail Jonson’s *Catiline* and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, especially concentrating on their topical character. Both plays are shown to reconfigure luxury ‘as the product of a process in which excess engulfs and amplifies lack, figuratively disjoining the body-state’ (p. 183). *Catiline* specifically ‘seems to draw on the close lexical proximity between Latin “luxus” meaning soft-living, sumptuousness, and expense, and Latin “luxo” meaning dislocation, looseness or disjointedness’ (p. 188), while *Coriolanus* appears to experiment ‘with notions of luxury as dislocating excess in public body that manifests disorder by *producing* nothing but waste’ (p. 194).

I have very few reservations with this book, and only one can be considered significant, namely, the absence of a concluding chapter. Apart from the asymmetry resulting from having an introduction but not a conclusion — which in itself would be trivial — I feel the book ends somehow too abruptly with the discussion of *Coriolanus*. Given the complexity of the numerous issues the author raises and admirably discusses through the 206 pages that constitute this intellectually engaging volume, a short conclusion (even only three or four pages) would have been commendable as a way to summarize the main points of her discussion for the reader’s convenience. Less importantly, it is strange not to see any references to the anonymous *Caesar’s Revenge* (c. 1595) and to John Fletcher and Philip Massinger’s *The False One* (1620) in Scott’s brilliant discussion of the early modern reception of Cleopatra, who figures prominently in these plays, both dealing with her affair with Julius Caesar. True, Scott strictly focuses on a comparative analysis of texts portraying the relationship between Cleopatra and Mark Antony, and discussing these two plays would have been

somehow out of the scope of her chapter, but I would have liked to see them at least mentioned in a footnote. On an even lesser (and possibly irksomely pedantic) note, the volume displays an exceedingly annoying amount of typos, and the publication date of Costanzo Felici's *De Coniuratione Catilinae* is incorrectly reported as 1535 rather than 1518 (p. 184).

However, these remarks should not distract from the fact that Alison V. Scott has produced a very rigorously documented, thought-provoking and excellently written volume that fruitfully and compellingly explores the interactive relation between words and concepts, and adds a whole new dimension to our understanding of the conceptual and intellectual history of luxury. It has the invaluable merit of demonstrating persuasively how certain socio-economic tensions and contradictions usually regarded as exclusive of contemporary capitalist, consumer-driven society were being negotiated as early as the seventeenth century. In so doing, Scott's study effectively provides a 'revisionary foundation for a significant body of work' (p. 21) in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature and culture that can now be looked at in quite a different light. But the book will not only prove to be relevant for scholars in the early modern field for filling a crucial gap in the scholarship about the history of luxury in the Western world by complicating 'definitive moral distinction between (old) destructive luxury and (new) productive luxury that emerge in early modernity' (p. 9). Even more importantly, due to Scott's constant and fascinating effort to explore the most profound connections between the present and the past, *Literature and the Idea of Luxury in Early Modern England* emerges as a veritable manifesto for the importance and the usefulness of the study of the literary works of previous ages to our contemporary reality.