Anita Gilman Sherman. *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature*. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 270 pp. ISBN 9781108903813. $103.00 hardback.**

by Chloe Kathleen Preedy

The question of what it might mean to doubt lies at the heart of Anita Gilman Sherman's detailed study of early modern skepticism. Where much recent work on the literary representation of historical skepticism has focused on the religious significance of a position that contemporary authors often identified with disbelief, Sherman favors a more capacious understanding. Defining skepticism as an "epistemological condition constantly in process and subject to change" (3), she evaluates the aesthetic, political, and linguistic stances and negotiations adopted and pursued by a range of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors as they responded to individual and societal experiences of doubt. This shift of emphasis importantly complements and enriches previous studies of early modern skepticism insofar as it enables a fuller appreciation of this concept's literary presence and significance.

In particular, Sherman's approach allows her to foreground subtle forms of skeptical expression or negotiation within the work of predominantly English authors who might not have engaged in radical assertions of disbelief: those featured in her study include Margaret Cavendish, John Donne, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Andrew Marvell, John Milton, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare. Moreover, while the literature of the early modern period remains her focus, Sherman frequently draws connections to modern reflections on skepticism, citing work by Giorgio Agamben, Hans Blumenberg, and Stanley Cavell, among others. The resulting study is thought-provoking and frequently intriguing, though likely to challenge readers who are not already familiar with skeptical thought. Sherman's flexible interpretation of what

constitutes early modern skepticism also means that the significance of individual topics is not always explicitly stated: for instance, the case for connecting medieval nominalism and early modern skepticism unfolds allusively, as does her reading of Marvell's verse as an expression of sublime skepticism. That is not to say that the associations Sherman draws are unconvincing; rather, that to appreciate them fully requires cumulative attention to the various modes of cognitive and linguistic doubt that she describes.

Ultimately, *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature* is perhaps less concerned with how early modern texts convey skeptical positions than it is with how their authors are responding to *experiences* of doubt. Indeed, Sherman's attention to subtle traces of skeptical thinking, rather than overt declarations of doubt, is central to her book's contribution to our understanding of skepticism's early modern literary presence: as she puts it, in an opening look at the doubts voiced by Shakespeare's Horatio, skepticism "permits of degrees" (3), being frequently experienced during the process of forming beliefs and convictions.

Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature is Sherman's second full-length study of skepticism in English literature, and in part extends themes introduced in her 2007 monograph *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*. Sherman's deep familiarity with early modern and modern skeptical discourses is evident in her latest book, which considers a wider range of authors and intellectual positions and foregrounds the aesthetic and political implications of early modern skepticism. At the same time, Sherman importantly extends her prior attention to skeptical thinking in the work of John Donne and William Shakespeare, as demonstrated by Chapter Two's fascinating comparative analysis of "The Ecstasy" and "The Phoenix and Turtle." This chapter contends that seventeenth-century philosophical developments prompted an emerging interest in private language that anticipated Ludwig Wittgenstein's well-known twentieth-century articulation of this concept. Sherman demonstrates how the related desire for linguistic intimacy is explored within Donne and Shakespeare's poems, albeit to strikingly different ends; she concludes that, whereas "The Ecstasy" "stages a fantasy of transparent intimacy" (85), the inscrutable relationship that Shakespeare depicts both replicates and troubles the idea of a private language shared with only one alter ego. The skeptical implications of texts that interrogate the limits of readerly—and authorial—knowledge are intriguing, and I especially enjoyed Sherman's perspective on the relationship between the two poems: one familiar to

many students and scholars of English literature, and another that rarely receives attention. In fact, although it is relatively short, this chapter is arguably the book's most perceptive and persuasive. The case-study focus on Donne and Shakespeare, together with the comparatively accessible theoretical framework, is also likely to appeal to advanced undergraduate readers.

Chapter One is likely to be of particular interest to readers of this journal, as it investigates skeptical elements in Edmund Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's expressed and implied doubts about the status of visions and other mental fictions have attracted considerable critical attention over the years, but Sherman argues that the early modern author's debt to medieval philosophy remains significantly underappreciated. The underpinning contextual argument takes a while to develop fully, as the first part of the chapter interweaves comparative references to the elusiveness of knowledge in the writings of Virginia Woolf, Mark Rothko, and Martin Heidegger. That approach speaks to the book's wider interest in prospective affinities between early modern and modern skepticism, but somewhat complicates Sherman's initial account of the relationship between late medieval nominalism and sixteenth-century philosophical questioning. The potential for nominalism's insistence that universal values are labels without any corresponding reality to provoke epistemological doubt has been well documented by those studying the work of William of Ockham and his colleagues, and this part of the chapter seems to presume at least some existing familiarity with that material. As the chapter continues, Sherman convincingly demonstrates the emphasis that late medieval skepticism places on the "contingent nature of things" (45), and the influence of such arguments on Spenser's literary engagement with supposed visions and with abstract concepts such as "truth" and "beauty." Her close reading of Spenser's early, apocalyptic translations from Joachim Du Bellay's *Songe* is effective in this regard, illuminating an instance in which Spenser "interrogates the meaning and status of his visions" (50) through the medium of poetry. Sherman next considers The Song of Dido from the "November" eclogue of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, tracing how the author's free translation of Clément Marot's "Eclogue sur le Trespas de ma Dame Loyse de Savoye" problematizes the literary representation of ideals as it moves from the particular to the universal: thus, for Sherman, Spenser's Dido becomes an abstracted, ethereal presence within this eclogue. Sherman closes the chapter by reassessing Spenser's poetic treatment of visions in Book Six of *The Faerie Queene*, evaluating the ironized

Orphic vision that Colin Clout conjures on the slopes of Mount Acidale and comparing the nominalist tensions around legitimacy that pervade *The Mutability Cantos*.

Questions of legitimacy are also central in Sherman's fourth chapter, which explores Margaret Cavendish's receptiveness to skeptical philosophy. Sherman argues that, for Cavendish, skeptical doubt provides a rationale for challenging male claims to knowledge. After an initial discussion of how Cavendish discredits the "new science" in *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*, Sherman focuses on Cavendish's representation of truth-seeking and the memory arts in *The Blazing World*. For instance, Sherman intriguingly extends her previous research into how skeptical impulses transformed Donne and Shakespeare's literary treatment of remembrance through a fascinating analysis of Cavendish's own response to such issues. Here, she proposes that the imaginary cityscapes of *The Blazing World* convey Cavendish's skepticism about the memory arts by at once recalling the mnemonic strategies recommended in texts such as the Roman treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and withholding the intended outcome: these dream cities provide similar iconographical cues, but "do not help with the work of memorizing or memorializing" (149). Sherman further compares Cavendish's strategic skepticism, which enables the seventeenth-century author to disrupt received assumptions about scientific truth, to Hans Blumenberg's "reoccupation" thesis: a twentieth-century strategy that itself probes the relationship between concept and metaphor, and which is likewise "premised on uncertainty and doubt" (139).

This method, in which a modern philosophical theory is introduced to illuminate the skeptical implications of an early modern text, is one that Sherman employs throughout her book. Indeed, one of her stated aims is to "capture the skeptical pulse at the heart of modernity" (7). I had some initial reservations about this approach, insofar as it might potentially distort how early modern authors and their readers conceived of skepticism, but Sherman is careful to distinguish between different moments in the intellectual history of skepticism when discussing primary texts. Her theoretical engagements with modern philosophy are complemented throughout by astute historical readings; moreover, as Sherman points out, most of the thinkers she cites are themselves engaging with seventeenth-century developments, as is for instance the case with Agamben, Cavell, and Charles Taylor. Several of Sherman's own case studies relate explicitly to specific early modern events, including the political and societal upheaval associated with the English (or British) Civil Wars. Chapter Three

considers this subject in detail, proposing that Lord Herbert of Cherbury's efforts to adopt a politically neutral stance during the mid-seventeenth-century conflict between Royalist and Parliamentarian forces can be connected to his prior idealization of consent and conformity in *De veritate* (1624). While this work exalted faith and sought to counter skeptical attacks on cognition, Sherman suggests that Herbert's emphasis on conformity and consent led him to value "an epistemological neutrality that shares features with skepticism's suspension of judgement" (103), and which eventually culminated in avowals of political neutrality: a position that Sherman identifies with "skepticism's quietist side" (95).

Herbert's *De veritate* was considered difficult even by contemporaries such as René Descartes, as Sherman notes, and his *Life and Reign of King Henry VIII* (1649) is also rarely studied today. In contrast, Sherman's final chapter and conclusion focus on two seventeenth-century authors whose work is still widely read: Andrew Marvell and John Milton. Chapter Five interprets many of Marvell's poems, including "The Garden," "Upon Appleton House," and "An Horatian Ode," as compensatory responses to skeptical observation in which attention to unreliable appearances produces aesthetic delight. Sherman connects Marvell's aestheticizing of doubt through his effecting of a "skeptical sublime" to Agamben's account of eighteenth-century developments in aesthetic taste, evaluating Marvell's introduction of self-critical personae and seeming interest in testing the boundaries of good taste through his verse. Finally, Sherman introduces Milton's closet drama *Samson Agonistes* in a concluding study that draws together key themes from the book, arguing that this work warns about the risks of introspection and reveals the "existential anguish caused by the uncertainties of interpretation" (227). In the process, she also links her wide-ranging study of aesthetic, cognitive, and political skepticism back to the kind of expressed religious doubt with which skepticism as a concept is perhaps most often associated.

Overall, *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature* offers a learned, insightful, and nuanced account of how early modern English and Welsh authors responded to and processed experiences of skepticism through their writings. The range of writers and texts that Sherman discusses allows her to consider a broad spectrum of attitudes towards doubt: although it is never possible to include *all* the authors and positions one might wish, as Sherman observes, this book maintains an effective balance between well-known and less-studied works. In addition, the use of

focused chapter case studies gives clear structure to a work that synthesizes such a wide selection of philosophical and theoretical writings. As previously noted, this book is likely to appeal most to readers with some existing knowledge of the theories upon which Sherman draws, with her attention to subtle doubts, gradations within skeptical thinking, and the aesthetic implications of skeptical experiences complementing existing studies that have tended to prioritize the religious and societal implications of sustained skepticism. This book may also be of interest to those studying the authors or texts that Sherman analyzes in detail, insofar as Sherman provides new perspectives on some familiar works and foregrounds others that are rarely discussed. Throughout, this book persuasively demonstrates skepticism's creative impact on literary production in early modern England and will valuably complement other recent works on this topic.

Chloe Kathleen Preedy
University of Exeter