**Paul Joseph Zajac.** *Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature: Reforming Contentment.* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 232 pp. ISBN 9781009271660. $110.00 hardback.**

The literary and cultural history of emotion is one of the most vibrant areas of research in early modern studies today. Paul Joseph Zajac's *Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature: Reforming Contentment* is one of the latest full-length treatments of Renaissance emotion; it is a truly excellent book that will be of interest both to those already invested in this subfield and to scholars of early modern literature more broadly.

*Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature* is the first full-length treatment of *contentment*, which the Introduction describes as "the emotional and ethical principle that became the gold standard of English Protestant psychology and an abiding concern of English Renaissance literature" (2). Against the modern critical tendency to see contentment as a passive emotion, Zajac instead reveals it to be a "dynamic, protective, and productive" force in the early modern imagination; more than just

"satisfaction or mild happiness," it is better understood as a "form of self-fortification, of protecting the godly subject from the external threats of capricious fortune and the internal divisions caused by the passions" (2-3). The book's specific interest, as the title suggests, is the literary stakes of contentment, and Zajac demonstrates how Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and John Milton "revised concepts of content and its role in the Protestant English nation…creat[ing] fictive arenas that put the category into contact and conflict with the full gamut of early modern affects" (3).

The religious context of contentment is central to Zajac's argument; the book, he explicitly writes, "takes a religious approach, and shows how the Reformation supplied writers from Sidney to Milton with a new conceptual toolkit for investigating contentedness" (5). In this sense *Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature* valuably joins recent works that have analyzed the intersection of emotion and religion, such as Susan Karant-Nunn's *The Reformation of Feeling* (2010), Alec Ryrie's *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (2013), and Steven Mullaney's *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (2015). In general, studies of Protestant emotion have focused on despair, so Zajac's turn to an alternate affective mode makes it an especially useful contribution to the field. And more broadly, the book's emphasis on contentment also makes it a welcome addition to the growing body of research on *positive* emotions in early modern studies: the first wave of twenty-first century scholarship on Renaissance emotion was quite heavily focused on interrogating negative passions. This tendency was memorably noted by Richard Strier in *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (2011), who encouraged researchers to expand their range of analysis. Although (as Zajac notes) practical experience sometimes troubles any easy distinction between "positive" and "negative" emotion, it is generally true that scholarship in the last decade has heeded Strier's call, and *Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature* thus stands alongside more recent books like Kathleen French's *Shakespeare and Happiness* (2022), Richard Meek's *Sympathy in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (2023), and my own co-edited (with Cora Fox and Cassie M. Miura) collection *Positive Emotions in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (2021). (Full disclosure: certain paragraphs from *Emotion and the Self* first appeared in an essay from that collection.)

Many book-length studies of early modern literary emotion follow a familiar pattern: an initial historicist chapter excavates the cultural discourse surrounding the target emotion, and the rest of the chapters engage that discourse via literary case studies. This format is familiar because it works, and Zajac puts it to excellent use. Chapter 1, "Constructing Contentment in Reformation England," establishes the historical context of early modern contentment, tracing a cluster of words like *content*, *contentment*, and *contentation* across contemporary religious works (including "theological treatises, sermons, martyrologies, and other texts of the Reformation" [13]) and works of political and natural philosophy. Though classical and medieval writers wrote about the sentiment, Zajac argues that English Renaissance thinkers "transformed this material, resulting in a tremendous archive on contentment" (17); to reflect this, he begins his analysis by tracing the affective formulations that emerged from this archive, starting with early sixteenth-century translations of the writings of St. Paul and Luther and ending with religious works produced during the Interregnum. As the notion of contentment became defined and redefined in theological, medical, and political contexts, it emerged as a feeling "capable of preserving, protecting, and empowering the self," and a "significant means…of situating and sustaining early modern selves within the material and spiritual worlds" (21).

Chapter 2, "Romancing Contentment: Sex, Suffering, and the Passions in Sidney's *Arcadias*," begins the book's literary analysis of contentment. Zajac argues that *The Old Arcadia* engages the "strategies of romance" to arrive at "counter-intuitive and potentially scandalizing conclusions about contentment" (51): in portraying the erotically-entangled Pyrocles as an "exemplar of contented suffering," Sidney turns "sensual indulgence and pious action" into "unlikely bedfellows," creating a "complex continuity…between sexual satisfaction and virtuous endurance [that] constitutes Sidney's greatest and most original contribution to the Renaissance discourse on contentment" (52). *The Old Arcadia,* in other words, "converts sexual satisfaction into a resolute response to suffering, a condition resembling the contentation prized in Reformation England." Yet Sidney retreats in his revisions: when *The New Arcadia* shifts from pastoral to chivalric romance, Zajac observes, he "moderates this radical strain" (53), leading to a final depiction of contentment that is "both less efficacious for its characters and less innovative in early modern thought" (52).

Chapter 4, "Performing Contentment: Communal Affect and Passionate Disconnect in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Othello*," analyzes how these two plays depict the relationship between individual, communal, and political forms of content. For Shakespeare, Zajac suggests, contentment is "not simply about the psychology or physiology of the single self," but is also a social emotion about how we interact with others—whether "in a couple, a commonwealth, or anything in between" (102-103). But Shakespeare also crucially shows how contentment engages with other emotions. In the comic context of *As You Like It*, contentment gives rise to a commonwealth built on affective bonds that are able to guard against the social threat of envy. In the tragic context of *Othello*, in contrast, Iago is able to transform Othello's anxious contentment into jealousy, poisoning his relationship with both his wife and society at large. Thus *As You Like It* "presents contentment as something that must be shared," while *Othello* "reveals the dangers when one is overly possessive of it" (114).

Chapter 5, "Losing Contentment: Affect, Environment, and Empire in Milton's *Paradise Lost*," considers Milton's various responses to the contemporary discourse of contentment, which became increasingly articulated before and after the English Revolution. First, Zajac shows how Milton's *Eikonoklastes* directly combats the affective presentation of *Eikon Basikike*—the purported autobiography of Charles I, which works to "transform the king into the icon of a contented religious and political martyr" (126). In this "textual war over affect," Zajac argues that Milton seeks "to validate Parliamentarians' political grievances," casting "Charles I as an ungodly, discontented tyrant" (127). Turning to *Paradise Lost,* the chapter suggests that Satan's discontent is "an imperialist affect," through which "Satan perverts the Reformation ideal of contentment and consequently finds it impossible to relate to the world around him in any way other than as a conqueror." For his own part, Zajac suggests, Milton developed a new vision of contentment by focusing on the cultivation of a "paradise within," situated "between Satanic imperial discontent [and] Edenic pastoral content"—an affective strategy that helped guide him through the political disappointments of the Restoration (151-152).

It is Chapter 3, "Fashioning Contentment: Ethics, Emotion, and Literary Mode in Spenser's Poetry" that will be of most immediate interest to readers of this journal. Zajac first argues that the traditional assessment (inaugurated by Gabriel Harvey) of Spenser

as a discontented man has obscured the poet's complex engagement with the matter of contentment, which he treats "with the same degree of intellectual rigor evidenced in the larger period discourse" (76). The chapter's analysis of *The Faerie Queene* and *Complaints* shows Spenserian contentment as a robust, often contradictory sentiment that flexibly accommodates different literary situations and contexts, vitally engaging with various other passions. Flexibility is indeed the key, because for Zajac, "Spenser cannot endorse any affective ideal—contentment or otherwise—to be maintained in all circumstances" (78). Through his poetry, he thus comes to fashion a "modest," "situational" contentment that allows him to "conver[t]…an affective ideal into a lived practice" (79). The chapter begins by treating Book I of *The Faerie Queene,* unpacking the experiences of Red Cross and Una with the emotion. Neither character, Zajac suggests, can maintain a consistently contented state, yet in their adventures the emotion "punctuates other experiences, like productive sadness or pious anger, and it protests against an indulgence in overly destructive passions" (78). In relation to the end of Book I, Zajac writes, "Spenser reaffirms a contentment rooted in self-containment," concluding that "contentment can fortify the self, though fashioning selves requires a fuller affective range" (87).

Chapter 3 next turns to Spenser's infamously negative collection of *Complaints*, with a particular focus on *Mother Hubberds Tale*. This poem, Zajac writes, "imagines an uneasy alliance between contentment and complaint" (78), enabled by its literary roots in both medieval estates satire and Aesopian beast fable; it engages contentment "to acknowledge an alternative way of responding to the world's vanity" but also "points to the ways in which contentment was abused and dissembled by clerical and court figures" (94) in Spenser's own day. "Appeals to content," Zajac concludes, "can fortify the individual, but they also can be used to justify the hierarchy that the poem critiques"; thus "contentment provides a corrective to complaint and an affirmation of its necessity." Finally, the chapter ends its analysis by considering contentment in the pastoral world of *Faerie Queene* Book VI, which "critics have often read [as] profoundly embittered, disillusioned, and discontented" (94). Zajac thus traces the emotion through Calidore's story, which becomes "Spenser's final testing ground for contentment" (95). The ultimate escape of the Blatant Beast suggests that discontent can never be fully vanquished, but acknowledgement of this is built into Spenser's practical conceptualization of

contentment: "part of its appeal," the chapter concludes, "lies in its ability to endure moments of unpleasantness, grief and pain," and the way it can "combine or compete with other emotions without losing its identity or risking our own" (100). Thus, Spenser sees contentment as an unreachable cultural ideal, advocating instead for a "qualified version of content that must coexist with other, often more extreme, emotions," even when "those emotions may threaten contentment's very existence" (100).

*Emotion and the Self in English Renaissance Literature* is deeply researched, persuasively argued, and beautifully written. Scholars of Spenser will undoubtedly enjoy Chapter 3, but I suspect that they will also greatly benefit from the analysis throughout the rest of the book as well. Zajac is to be commended for this truly excellent contribution to early modern scholarship: books like this demonstrate why the literary and cultural study of emotion is one of the most important and exciting areas of the field.

*Bradley J. Irish*
*Arizona State University*