

well as biographical details of the abbesses and prioresses studied. Overall this is a satisfyingly detailed study of medieval English nunnery leaders.

Dianne Hall

*School of Historical Studies
University of Melbourne*

Spolsky, Ellen, *Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare's England*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; hardback; pp. xiv, 240; 17 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £45.00; ISBN 0230006310.

Ellen Spolsky is on the side of the Image. Her epigraph cites Ben Jonson: 'Whosoever loves not *Picture*, is injurious to Truth: and all the wisdom of Poetry.' In *Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare's England* she explores the consequences of Reformation iconoclasm from the perspective of cognitive literary and cultural theory. For Spolsky, the destruction of Catholic images and statues in England could not be compensated for by learning to read the Bible. The resulting 'cognitive hunger' was finally alleviated in the theatre by Shakespeare's intuitive understanding of how people think and feel. This was especially evident in the late tragicomedies, which adapt the mode of the Italian 'grotesque', offering spectacle, wonder, and the acceptance of 'unknowing'.

This brief summary is perhaps misleading. Spolsky's argument is complex and wide-ranging, drawing upon post-structuralist theory, research in physiology and psychology, new historicist insights, social and art history. She analyses Luther and Calvin's writings, Raphael's paintings, and Michelangelo's sculpture. In her model, cognition is 'embodied' or material. The brain has evolved structures which function in certain ways and together with environmental and social influences. Spolsky is most concerned with the role of vision and with 'natural human iconotropy – that is, the ability and even eagerness to learn from pictures and other visual representations' (p. 8). Her model has similarities with Arthur Kinney's neural networks and cultural webs in *Shakespeare's Webs: Networks of Meaning in Renaissance Drama* (2004).

Spolsky explains the impact of the English Reformation in terms of cognition, as 'a massive assault' (p. 26) on established brain networks of knowing and understanding (visual, aural, and kinetic) which had constructed religious experience and answered individual and communal needs. Learning previously was 'pictorial and analogical rather than verbal or syllogistic' (p. 36) so that reading was cognitively very different. The promotion of a 'text-based spirituality'

(p.104) thus left many people with an enduring ‘cognitive hunger’. The nature of the human cognitive system with its ‘pragmatic, dynamic, and responsive ... [rather than] platonic understanding of truth’ (p. 116) also caused problems for the Reformers as they attempted to categorise images, define the eucharist, and establish ‘an invariant literal meaning’ for the Bible (p. 114).

Spolsky contends that the drama compensated to some degree for the Reformation. This is not an unusual claim; Louis Adrian Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt come to mind, although in contrast Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* (1997), argues for the alignment of drama with the Reformers and the development of a new, Protestant way of seeing. The means of compensation identified by Spolsky is Shakespeare’s adaptation of the Italian ‘grotesque’. This style refers to images that break conventional rules by combining and flaunting heterogenous elements, evoking disorientation and delight. In Rome, the grotesque merged pagan/classical images and values with Christian ones – until the Council of Trent (1545) imposed boundaries between sacred and secular.

The grotesque, Spolsky suggests, appeals to the ‘cognitive restlessness’ of the brain (p. 150): the dynamic between the processes of ‘categorization’ and ‘analogy, transformation, or blending’ (p. 149) which underpins adaptability and creativity. The effect of the grotesque, as employed by Shakespeare in his late tragicomedies (Spolsky focuses on *Cymbeline*) was to feed the hunger for the divine left unsatisfied by the new religion (p. 129). In their ‘extreme theatricality’, improbable action, and providential resolutions, these plays offered their audiences something to see, feel, and marvel at: God’s providence, visible and embodied. They set aside rational explanation to inspire an exercise of faith.

For Spolsky, culture has biological foundations. ‘Cognitive cultural history’ looks to ‘the embodied structures and processes’ of the brain behind artistic creativity and audience receptivity (p. 186). Like sacred imagery, secular art prepares minds for understanding and change through emotion. Art offers repeated, provisional solutions (‘re-representations’) to problems that are ‘representationally hungry’ (p. 172). In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture these are related to what cannot be seen: the nature of God and the chastity of women. In Shakespeare’s theatre at least, the gods care and daughters are chaste (p. 152).

Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare’s England is strongly argued, with perceptive analyses of Reformist writings, Italian art, and Shakespeare’s tragicomedies. Spolsky’s cognitive model is especially useful in explaining literacy and cultural change – apart from some jarring, ‘pasted in’ terminology (p. 187) like the ‘multipod generativity of human minds’ (p. 192). Less successful,

however, are some of the connections in the argument. Spolsky asserts rather than explains Shakespeare's familiarity with Italian grotesque and pays little attention to theatrical context: the 'grotesque' mixing of discordant elements was alive and well in the drama long before *Cymbeline*, as were fortunate endings and stunning visual spectacle. Nor is the degree of 'cognitive hunger' in c. 1610 made clear. Older styles of visual processing did persist beyond 1600 alongside newer kinds of response (see my *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition* [2002]). Despite her interest in 'iconotropism', Spolsky fails to consider the effects on 'cognitive hunger' of the differing religious practices and the proliferating, secular visual signs in 'Shakespeare's England'.

Ruth Lunney

School of Humanities and Social Science

University of Newcastle

Sullivan, Garrett A., Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield, eds, *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006; paperback; pp. xiii, 338; RRP £21.99; ISBN 0195153863.

When compiling a list of suggested readings for a university course on English Renaissance drama, what are the sorts of things one should look for? Ideally, readings should be scholarly in content as well as form, providing a model for students writing their own essays. Readings should also be informed by current critical trends and debates, whilst remaining succinct and accessible to a student readership. Assessed in these terms, *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* offers a valuable collection that will no doubt find its way on to university reading lists.

At first glance, this is not the usual 'companion' collection that we are used to. The editors acknowledge as much in their introduction, admitting that 'whereas most "companion" texts divide material according to topics, ours begins with a slightly different structural principle: authors and their works' (p. v). After two preliminary essays on the material conditions of early modern drama (authorship and print, theatre companies and stages), the collection offers thematic essays on a number of 'canonical' plays of the period prepared by experts on both the plays and themes addressed. For instance, Gail Kern Paster's contribution, 'Bartholomew Fair and the Humoral Body', serves as a concise introduction to the sort of issues explored with greater detail in her monograph studies, *The Body Embarrassed* (1993) and *Humoring the Body* (2004). There is nothing controversial about the