

Angus Vine, "Harriet Archer, *Unperfect Histories: The Mirror for Magistrates, 1559–1610*," *Spenser Review* 49.2.17 (Spring-Summer 2019).

<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/49.2.17>

## Harriet Archer, *Unperfect Histories: The Mirror for Magistrates, 1559–1610*

by Angus Vine

Harriet Archer, *Unperfect Histories: The Mirror for Magistrates, 1559–1610*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xii + 203 pp. ISBN 978–0–19–880617–2. £60 (hb.).

Until recently, the *Mirror for Magistrates* was one of those texts that early modern scholars frequently cited, but rather less often read. Highly influential and clearly popular in its own day, serving as a model and source for writers from Shakespeare and Spenser to Daniel and Drayton, the *Mirror* was one of those embarrassing scholarly secrets. Everyone knew that they should have read it—and certainly everyone knew that the early moderns read it, often with great enthusiasm—but few actually bothered. The dismissive attitudes of earlier generations of critics appeared to die hard: following E. M. W. Tillyard's castigation of its 'execrable verse' and C. S. Lewis's caustic observation that '[n]o one lays down the *Mirror* without a sense of relief', critical attitudes were invariably dismissive or outright hostile.<sup>[1]</sup> The *Mirror*, it seemed, was one of that legion of once popular and significant texts fated to be misrepresented and misunderstood by later readers and subsequent eras.

Since the turn of the century, though, things have started to change, and there has been a Renaissance of interest in the work. Ground-breaking monographs by Paul Budra and Scott C. Lucas, *A Mirror for Magistrates and the de casibus Tradition* (2000) and *A Mirror for Magistrates and the Politics of the English Reformation* (2009), have transformed our understanding of the *Mirror*'s knotty production history, revealing its vexed political and historical contexts and its potential, at least, for subversive political commentary, as well as its complex engagement with its own *de casibus* tradition. A series of informative studies have followed, and in 2012 we even saw the first modern scholarly conference dedicated solely to the work (which took place at Magdalen College, Oxford). A new critical edition of the *Mirror* is also now in the wings, the first since 1938: something that,

given the *Mirror*'s immensely complex textual history, and its numerous recensions and additions, is sorely needed.<sup>[2]</sup> Harriet Archer's revisionist monograph, which focuses on the *Mirror*'s historiopoetics and their relationship with its textual transmission, is thus a timely and important addition to a now burgeoning field.

Archer's project in *Unperfect Histories* is two-fold: first, to refute long-held assumptions about the *Mirror*'s apparently unsophisticated historiography, and second, to challenge the similarly longstanding narrative about the text's decline from William Baldwin's original mid-Tudor project, conceived under Mary I, to Richard Niccols's Jacobean *Mirour for Magistrates* of 1610, commonly perceived as the text's nadir. For Archer, however, palpably neither is the case. The *Mirror*, she argues, is not the straightforward exemplary history that modern scholars have often considered it to be; nor is it a work diminished by its later continuations and editions. Rather, across each of its versions—1559, 1563, 1571, 1574–5, 1578, 1587, 1610—it's a self-consciously reflexive text and a study in historiography itself (ideal as well as actual). As she puts it, '[i]n each of the *Mirrors*, an ideal English history is figured in the plans [the authors] say they have made; by leaving each iteration incomplete, they declare that ideal's impossibility'; '[t]he subject of these histories', she adds, 'is not just the past, but also the act of composition' (2). The *Mirror* that emerges from Archer's monograph, then, is a text that's all about what it means to write history. And she's surely right about this: for from the prose frames to the fictionalised depictions of its own authors, and from its deep-seated interest in orality to its studied bookishness, the *Mirror* is unusually attentive to its own status as history. Thus, whether one reads the prose frames, for instance, as 'a truthful account of discussions between contributors to the collection which actually took place', or whether one sees them rather as 'a fictive, metaleptic narrative designed to draw attention to the work's artificiality' (4)—Archer herself perhaps wisely hedges her bets and advocates some kind of middle way—it's hard not to see Baldwin's project (and its various continuations) as an elaborate experiment in historical representation and form.

Archer's secondary purpose, to rehabilitate the *Mirror*'s later editions, is, at least on the face of it, more surprising. John Higgins, Thomas Blenerhasset, and Richard Niccols, after all, the men responsible for those versions, are rarely numbered amongst the most luminous of early modern writers. But rehabilitation, in that kind of simplistic way, is not really Archer's point, as she herself admits. What she does set out to do, and does compellingly, is to reveal hitherto neglected continuities between their versions and Baldwin's original project. What she shows, and with considerable weight of evidence, is that they too 'make transmission the bedrock of their interrogation of and participation in the theory and practice of historiography' (4), in exactly the

way as Baldwin had previously done. A reader of *Unperfect Histories* may not finish the book convinced that the reputations of Blenerhasset and Niccols as poets have been traduced. But that reader surely will think that their reputations as writers of history have been grossly underestimated. Higgins, Blenerhasset and Niccols all emerge from this book as much more sophisticated historiographical thinkers, and much more integral to the *Mirror*'s cumulative, and corporeal, purpose, than scholars had previously realised.

What brings the two strands of Archer's story together is a focus on 'unperfectness': for her, the keynote for the *Mirror* in each of its iterations, and more fundamentally, as she puts it in her opening sentence, 'the condition of historical narrative' itself (1). What also unites her story is her sustained attention to the *Mirror*'s paratexts, as she adopts a theoretical approach informed by the textual scholarship of Jerome McGann and Gérard Genette. As we might expect given the importance that she attaches to the *Mirror*'s transmission, *Unperfect Histories* proceeds through each of the major versions of the text, and in each of the five corresponding chapters Archer reflects upon aspects of the *Mirror*'s imperfect, incomplete, unfinished nature, and shows how the authors adopt and adapt that 'unperfectness' for their own political and personal moments. Chapter 1 explores the genesis and expansion of Baldwin's *Mirror*, from its abortive and censured Marian beginnings, through the text that was eventually printed by Richard Marsh in 1559, to its various adaptations between 1563 and 1610. Throughout the chapter, Archer foregrounds the self-conscious textual instability apparent in each of the versions of the work, and suggestively reads this in the light of 'an appropriative Reformation poetics [...] whose primary focus is the instability of textual authority' (21), and which she traces back via Skelton to Chaucer. The *Mirror*'s transmission history, that complex, messy tradition that previous scholars have so often sidestepped, thus emerges as the key to understanding the text: that history, Archer concludes, 'reveals a remarkably coherent body of work, whose interests and focus fluctuate, but whose later iterations extend and unpick tendencies present from the outset' (38).

Chapter 2 develops this argument by turning to John Higgins's editing, and in particular to the sixteen British tragedies that he added to his 1574 *First Part of the Mirror*, and the one further tragedy that he included a year later. Archer reads Higgins's additions in the context of his (little known) poetic career more generally, arguing that his literary oeuvre as a whole is characterised by a desire to fix knowledge, secure textual records, and fill in textual gaps. In the case of the *Mirror*, that desire took on an added urgency, given that Higgins was tackling the notoriously incomplete, unperfect Galfridian matter of Britain. By turning to the matter of Britain, and in

emphasising the textual inconsistencies there, the *First Part*, she suggests, foregrounds its own difficulties, but also seeks to alleviate them; '[t]he *First Part*,' she comments, 'negotiates its historiographical difficulties by formally foregrounding them' (61). The *First Part*, in this way, comes to share the anxieties about inadequate textual evidence and gaps in the textual record that much more philologically minded writers such as the Italian historian Polydore Vergil had previously voiced, and which would characterise the nascent antiquarian project.

If Higgins is little known, Chapter 3 turns to the even less discussed Thomas Blenerhasset, who completed his own version of the *Mirror* (1578) in glorious isolation as a captain garrisoned on the island of Guernsey. '[F]ar from assisting Higgins in his mission to complete the *Mirror*'s coverage', Archer argues, Blenerhasset in fact 'exposes the flawed logic behind a reconstruction of history that was only imperfect memory and invention' (72). As she points out, the consequent 'poetics of textual loss' doubtless reflected Blenerhasset's own deeply felt sense of creative isolation 'beyond the seas'. They also, though, constituted a serious, and influential, intervention in contemporary debates about historical reconstruction and memory, something that Blenerhasset signals through his employment of the paratextual figures and voices 'Memory' and 'Inquisition'. Adopted, but also adapted from Aristotle's *De memoria*, these personifications underscore the self-reflexive, historiopoetic aspect of the text—something that later poets, not least Spenser in the episode of Eumnestes' chamber in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, picked up on.

Chapter 4 returns to Higgins, this time in the shape of his 1587 edition and that version's vast expansion of the *Mirror*. By including fifteen Roman tragedies for the first time, whose significance as political counsel and whose topical relevance would have been immediately recognised, Higgins's edition, Archer argues, further problematises the exemplary model of history that it purports to perform. Drawing, in particular, on the examples of Nero and Caracalla (the subject of two of Higgins's additions), she shows that this particular *Mirror* foregrounds the difficulties with its own generic mode and reveals that not all generically or structurally conceived 'falls' have useful moral lessons. 'The focus of this *Mirror*,' she argues, 'is not warning magistrates against bad government using historical examples, but the utility of historical examples to shadow current events' (123); 'Higgins's additions,' she concludes, 'communicate an anti-exemplarity' (131). Revealingly, the chapter then connects this to the broader disillusionment with exemplary history that played out in the drama and satire of the 1590s and 1600s: to give just one example, which Archer cites, Higgins's anti-exemplarity clearly anticipates the much more celebrated playing with *de casibus* form three years later in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. The supposedly

conservative *Mirror*, as Archer wryly notes, beat the famously unorthodox Marlowe to it.

In the final chapter, Archer turns to Niccols's 1610 *Mirour for Magistrates*: perhaps the most familiar later version of the text, and certainly the one most commonly impugned. As well as adding a number of tragedies of his own, Niccols meticulously excised the prose frames and links and cleared up the uncertainty about the textual record that is such a feature of previous versions: an editorial intervention that modern scholars (with just a few exceptions) have seen as a dilution of the text and a serious misjudgement. For Archer, however, this is not the case: Niccols's excisions, rather, are part of his project to refashion the *Mirror* as an explicitly 'oppositional' text, to reassert the significance of a particular mode of learned, Spenserian poetry, and to resist the 'wider moral decadence of his times' (149). His editing, she argues, allows him to reinstate those moral and aesthetic values, which previous versions of the text, through their self-reflexive uncertainty, had called into question. Thus, rather than the efforts of a misguided editor, Niccols's rewriting of the *Mirror* should in fact be seen as a significant political intervention, and an expression of extreme disappointment at the Jacobean age and James VI and I's administration and government. It was, in other words, yet another manifestation of that 'harking back to Elizabeth', which characterised so much early Stuart verse.<sup>[3]</sup> The argument here, as in previous chapters, is a convincing one.

*Unperfect Histories* is a short book, and this means that Archer does not always have the space for the kind of contextualisation that her project warrants. Throughout the book, she rightly adduces textual, intellectual and historiographical parallels, but lack of space means that she generally does this by name, or in her footnotes, rather than with sustained comparative analysis. This is a pity because her argument, as she herself notes, clearly has significant implications for a range of other early modern authors in the *Mirror* mould, from Drayton and Daniel to William Warner, Thomas Lodge and Lodowick Lloyd, and also for early modern historical culture more generally. What does the self-reflexive nature of the *Mirror* tell us about that culture? How does the *Mirror*'s textual instability, and its insistent foregrounding of that, help us to understand early modern attitudes towards, and representations of, the past? More fundamentally, how characteristic was the *Mirror* here? These are questions that the book skirts around rather than directly addresses, and yet they are important ones, not least for understanding the vogue for historical complaints and *Mirror*-style tragedies that emerged in later Elizabethan literature. On a related point, it's a pity, too, that the book lacks a formal conclusion. While chapter 5 does end by gesturing towards the wider significance of the project, that significance is

never fully spelled out; the reader is left to infer Archer's conclusions from remarks here and elsewhere in the book.

Nonetheless, these gaps in no way detract from the significance of Archer's achievement, and in many ways they are simply the product of the book's origins as a PhD dissertation. Her story is, on the whole, well made and (notwithstanding those gaps) impressively well documented. Her arguments about textual transmission and self-reflexivity are wholly convincing; so, too, are her arguments about the later editions of the *Mirror* and their continuity with Baldwin's vision. And her fundamental point, that the *Mirror* constitutes a series of sustained critical engagements with the whole business of what it means to read and write history, is an excellent one. *Unperfect Histories* will, therefore, undoubtedly change how we read the *Mirror*. No scholar worth their salt now will simply be able to rehearse those earlier twentieth-century canards. If nothing else, *Unperfect Histories* makes it abundantly clear that we can no longer talk about the *Mirror* in the singular. It was, as Archer shows, always a polyvocal and plural, and an accretive and accumulative, project. In the same way, Higgins, Blenerhasset and Niccols can no longer simply be castigated as the villains of the piece; they emerge from this book as just as important to the *Mirror* project as Baldwin, Churchyard, Ferrers and all the other members of the original authorship group. And to persuade readers of that, as Archer so effectively does, is some achievement. It is to be hoped, therefore, that future scholars will rise to the challenge, explore the implications of Archer's story, and uncover what this major reassessment of the *Mirror* means for the legion other Elizabethan verse histories, legends and complaints.

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[1] E. M. W. Tillyard, 'A *Mirror for Magistrates* Revisited', in Herbert Davis and Helen Gardner (eds), *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies* (Clarendon, 1959), 10; C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford UP, 1954), 246.

[2] Lucas's edition of the *Mirror*'s first two editions of 1559 and 1563 is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

[3] Cf. Anne Barton, 'Harking Back to Elizabeth: Ben Jonson and Caroline Nostalgia', *ELH*, 48 (1981), 706–31.