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# Memories of War in Early Modern England: Armor and Militant Nostalgia in Marlowe, Sidney, and Shakespeare / Susan Harlan

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**Susan Harlan. *Memories of War in Early Modern England: Armor and Militant Nostalgia in Marlowe, Sidney, and Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 317 pp.**

Reviewed by ANDREW BOZIO

Susan Harlan's *Memories of War in Early Modern England* makes an important contribution to the study of memory in early modern England by foregrounding the way that the objects of war shaped narratives about the past. For Harlan, armor, trophies, and spoils are polytemporal objects that, in their very materiality, mediate the relationship between early modern England and its history. As gunpowder and musket shot introduced new dangers to the early modern battlefield, "armor became increasingly useless" (2). And yet, elite figures continued to don this ineffective protection, engaging in what Harlan calls "militant nostalgia," a cultural fixation upon antiquated military artifacts that implicitly narrativizes the relationship between present and past (1). Exploring the paradoxes of this nostalgia through Christopher Marlowe, Sir Philip Sidney, and William Shakespeare, Harlan's book forcefully demonstrates that memory was rooted in the material culture of early modern England.

For Harlan, then, objects of war embody specific relationships between the present and the past. Armor's uselessness on the early modern battlefield allowed it to acquire new symbolic resonances, in the same way that trophies and spoils recycled ancient artifacts in the service of new ideological regimes. But even more suggestive is Harlan's claim that these objects provide a potent metaphor for the way that early modern English subjects appropriated elements of the classical and medieval past. Like the practice of spoiling—that is, "the sanctioned theft of the arms and armor of the vanquished and the rearrangement of these fragmentary materials into new aesthetic forms"—early modern literature appropriates elements of the past and redeploys those elements in new narratives (2). Harlan's book thereby sheds light upon the paradoxes of armor and other objects of war in early modern England, at the same time that it uses the polytemporality of those objects as a hermeneutic for rereading early modern literature.

Accordingly, the book's first chapter focuses upon the paradoxes of militant nostalgia in *Tamburlaine*. Harlan persuasively argues that Tamburlaine's self-fashioning is not divorced from its material contexts. That is, accustomed to focusing upon Tamburlaine's soaring rhetoric or his ruthless deeds—or, at best, the relationship between the two—scholars have overlooked the importance of Tamburlaine's armor in transforming the Scythian shepherd into the scourge of God. If armor is the key to Tamburlaine's self-fashioning and, thus, to his military prowess, Harlan argues that it also transforms Tamburlaine into an aesthetic object. Reading Tamburlaine's appropriation of armor alongside a portrait of the historical Tamerlane in Robert Vaughan's *The Pourtraictures at Large of Nine Modern Worthies* (1622), Harlan concludes that "armor is essentially an aesthetic object in *Tamburlaine* that obscures 'actual' military violence by constructing the military

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subject as an aesthetic object” (54). Through *The Almain Armourer’s Album*—a mid- to late-sixteenth century English catalogue of armor—Harlan demonstrates the fragmentation at the heart of this aesthetic enterprise, noting that the presentation of armor in pieces reveals “the constructed nature of the armored body and its resulting divisibility” (66).

As compelling as these arguments are, Harlan’s first interlude—the first of three short chapters that complement the longer arguments—is perhaps even more exciting for returning critical attention to one of Marlowe’s most understudied plays, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. Harlan argues that the play “stages the challenges of simultaneously remembering the past and looking to the future,” resulting in a form of militant nostalgia that spoils both subjects and objects (86). As Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy, he endeavors to speak “with Achilles’ tongue” and encourages his audience to hear him “with Myrmidons’ harsh ears,” effectively “despoiling the body parts of other fighters” in the service of his narrative (94). Here, Harlan suggests that bodies, like objects, can function as the medium of memory, and she connects Aeneas’s use of “disfigured and mutilated combatant[s]” to the way that time itself appears out of joint in the play (95).

Furthering this line of inquiry into the effects of militant nostalgia upon bodies, Harlan turns in the book’s second chapter to various forms of mourning and memorializing Sir Philip Sidney after his death in 1586. These forms include several elegies written in the immediate aftermath of Sidney’s death—most notably, Spenser’s “Astrophel” and Mary Sidney’s “The Dolefull Lay of Clorinda,” both contained in the *Astrophel* volume presented to Sidney’s widow, Frances Walsingham—Thomas Lant’s depiction of the funeral procession in his 1588 illustrated roll, and Sir Fulke Greville’s *Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney* (1652). In bringing these materials together, Harlan foregrounds the way that affective memory inaugurates a “struggle between the actual, lost subject and an object that stands in for this subject” (117). The elegies shed light upon the way that early modern England “reckoned” with Sidney’s death (to follow Harlan in quoting Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*) by transforming Sidney into a spoil of war. *Lant’s Roll* compounds the paradoxes of the elegies in showing us that the funeral procession drew heavily upon “the imagery of the Roman triumph” and thus spoiled the Roman past at the same time that it spoiled Sidney himself (143). For Harlan, these acts of spoiling are intimately related to one another. They reveal, once more, that militant nostalgia was not simply a form of cultural memory but also a mode of understanding England’s relationship to its past.

The final section of the book locates these concerns within Shakespeare’s plays. In the second interlude, Harlan notes that “*Henry V* displays a marked preoccupation with dismembered and fragmented bodies throughout,” and she uses this insight to advance a compelling reading of the play’s reliance upon bodies in its negotiation of memory and nationalism (195). These readings culminate in a brilliant reading of the relationship between fragmented bodies and collective memory in the St. Crispin’s Day speech. Harlan’s final chapter turns to *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, arguing that these plays consistently figure “a perceived Roman militant past...as distant, inaccessible, and in some ways inauthentic” (218). For Harlan, objects of war—specifically, trophies and

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armor—disrupt the audience’s access to a Roman past even as they enable it, resulting in a kind of dramatic historiography that is as fragmented as the armor itself. In part, the stakes lie in the fact that “the connection between England and ancient Rome is one of the many enabling fictions upon which the ‘imagined community’ of early modern English nationhood was founded” (217). Like *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, then, Shakespeare’s Roman plays attenuate the connection between England and its imperial antecedents, an attenuation mediated through objects of war.

Throughout the book, Harlan triangulates these investments in memory and material culture with a critical focus upon masculinity. As Harlan puts it, “the armored male body” was “a site upon which questions of masculinity, materiality, and memory intersect,” and thus the paradoxes that shape trophies and spoils—as signs of victory that bear traces of destruction and loss—illuminate the paradoxes of the armored body (1). If the armored body is, at once, “naked and covered, vulnerable and protected,” then armor itself offers us “a vision of the masculine body in crisis” (7). Harlan uses this insight not only to examine the fragmentation of masculine bodies in early modern England, but also to show how the gender dynamics of armor, trophies, and spoils transform our understanding of such figures as Zenocrate, Dido, and Cleopatra. Harlan’s argument is also wonderfully attuned to object oriented ontology, new materialism, and other theories that foreground the agential power of things. That said, her emphasis upon mutilation, fragmentation, and disfigurement, together with her observation that “Armor creates a prosthetic body,” raises the question of whether disability studies might also help to illuminate the vexed relationship between bodies and prosthetic armor in early modern England (6).

Still, Harlan’s book is a powerful exploration of the paradoxes that shape militant nostalgia and the armored body in early modern England. Like the armored body, which is and is not invulnerable to the dangers of early modern warfare, militant nostalgia is beset by tensions: spoiling a past that it aims to celebrate and introducing loss and decay into the thing that it would preserve. Harlan expertly delineates the implications of these paradoxes for early modern English literature and culture, making her book required reading for anyone working on militarism in the early modern period.

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