

John GUILLORY. 2022. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

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The next time we are asked to explain why literary scholarship is necessary John Guillory's advice against apologetic discourse may bring some assurance: "[t]he legitimacy of what we do needs in the first instance a better description," to which "[a] better defense will follow" (123). A reputed early modernist, Guillory is no newcomer to the debates on this topic. His erudite grasp of literary theory, the history of knowledge, and the sociology of professions helps him navigate perilous waters across the past, present, and future of literary studies. His new book has much to offer in the form of thematic variety: the professional and disciplinary recognition of literary studies; the discontents of specialization; the demarcation of English studies with respect to philology or linguistics; the troubled relations between literary research and interpretation; the (dis)continuities between scholarly and lay forms of reading; the curriculum in the era of information and media and global English; the demands of graduate education against the job market crisis; and the evaluation of scholarship in the humanities. A unifying thesis presides over his analysis: "Literary study," he argues, "became a profession before it became a discipline" (VII). Guillory argues that the efforts to confer epistemological foundations, methodologies, and disciplinary protocols on a practice whose authority derives from its originary amateur identity are relatively recent. Accordingly, our present-day anxieties about our object of study betray contradictions between its undisciplined past and its present commitment to professionalism. The oxymoron-founded formula *professing criticism* is mostly the overstated response with which literary scholars have confronted suspicions about their legitimacy. Yet, as an alternative to self-justification, Guillory advocates a reorientation of the rationales of literary scholarship toward "a credible estimation of its aims" (XVI).

A preference for the collection of essays over the monograph structures a book which, excepting one or two pieces, presents a coherent whole through its three parts and substantial conclusion. Part I, "The

Formation and Deformation of Literary Studies," builds along its three chapters the historical coordinates that established the study of literature as a university discipline in the late nineteenth century. A sociological perspective informs Guillory's account of the institution of literary scholarship as organized intellectual labor, a process that entailed specialization, a system of bureaucratic procedures, and an ideology of public service that could legitimize its social function. The immediate effect was a questioning of criticism's originary purpose since the late seventeenth century: the aesthetic evaluation of literary works. Guillory's most compelling pages in this part concern the contemporary challenges to the early-twentieth-century attempts to anchor literary knowledge within the disciplinary bounds of the *university*. Thus, the emergence of theory in the 1960s aimed to revolutionize scholarship's social function by identifying *criticism* with political *critique*: in this new context, "criticism claims to wield an Archimedean lever: it wants to move the *world*" (74; my emphasis). A second challenge, motivated by theory's "overestimation of aim" (81), comes from the present "postcritical" condition, which tries to reconcile the academia with the world by replacing close, interpretative, detached forms of professional reading with distant, descriptive, affective alternatives that intend to reconnect critical practice with a world of media consumers for whom literature has lost prominence. While Guillory diagnoses exhaustion in politically committed criticism, he characterizes the postcritical movement as one that "has failed to move beyond the phase of manifesto" (101). These polemical arguments enable a self-humbling conclusion: literary scholars must responsibly identify their place in "a larger world of reading practices," but also acknowledge literature's limited space in education and society if they want to avoid the "tendency to construct literary study as something more than it can be and less than it should be" (102).

The effects of professionalization upon literature as an object of study occupy Part II, "Organizing Literature: Foundations, Antecedents, Consequences." Its five chapters aim to legitimize the place of literature in the wider field of the humanities. In Guillory's argument (chapter 4), this place explains the concurrence in the literary object of an appeal to human memory — *monumentality* — and a material embodiment — *documentality*. Turning specifically to English literary studies, Guillory locates its antecedents in the seventeenth-century decline of rhetoric and the rise of philology and the teaching of *belles lettres* (chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 7, "The Location of Literature," addresses the

twentieth-century redefinition of the literary object around notions of *literariness* and its relegation of popular forms to a sub-literary level, the shaping of the imaginative genres, the preferment of the novel, and the stigmatization of poetry as “*different from literature*” (223). These antecedents pave the way for chapter 8, “The Contradictions of Global English,” which addresses the curriculum. Guillory discusses the challenges launched by feminist or postcolonial studies, but is also attentive to issues such as the elimination of the boundaries between canonical and non-canonical genres and the attention paid to non-literary forms with the rise of media studies. Guillory’s decided call to “democratize the curriculum” (235) comes with a caveat: if the postcritical elevation of affective reading recommends that students “see themselves” in what they read, then our responsibility to otherness is foreclosed, as “teaching students how to read literature that is *not* immediately relatable to their self-identification is one of the most important things we do” (230). The argument applies to works produced in non-European or non-American contexts, and in contemporary media as much as it does to medieval or early modern literature, as inclusiveness should never ignore commitment to the study of “real conditions of production and circulation” (234).

The four chapters of Part III, “Professionalization and Its Discontents,” make up the least homogeneous group. While Chapter 11’s focus on academic writing seems extraneous to the main subject, Chapter 12, “The Question of Lay Reading,” resumes arguments from Part I, leaving Chapters 10 and 11 as the most relevant to the announced topic. Chapter 10, “Evaluating Scholarship in the Humanities,” begins with a defense of *accountability*: “evaluative discourse gives an enriched description of scholarly work by answering to it and for it” (281). Guillory’s verdict on the role of publication in external processes of assessment is categorical: “[i]f scholarship aims rightly to be made public, it is unhappily the case that the pressure to publish as a requisite of professorial advancement often makes publication the reason for scholarship and not the other way round” (187). The negative effects of this pressure upon long-term, ambitious projects, or upon considering teaching valuable scholarship, are subjected to scrutiny. Solutions point to qualitative assessment on account of scholarship’s potential to re-orient research beyond the archive, and to disentangle interpretation from the tyranny of demonstrable validity. Guillory’s call for a new “poetics of scholarship” may sound impracticable for anxious times — see in this respect his compelling defense of the footnote (298) —

but is symptomatic of our need to rethink career standards outside of bureaucratized protocols.

Chapter 9, “On the Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education,” interrogates, mainly in the American context, the crisis of the job market in English departments in the context of the professional exigencies imposed on graduate studies. Guillory focuses on the demand for publications, conference presentations, and teaching excellence as symptoms of a professional orientation of graduate studies that clashes with decreasing job opportunities. To overcome this contradiction, Guillory envisages a model that tries to make a virtue of necessity: as pre-professional demands have created a “semiautonomous professional sphere” (272) of graduate associations, journals, and conferences that transcends the organization of university graduate programs, then that sphere could be reconnected with agents beyond academia in an effort to “model a literary and intellectual culture that no longer needs the career of college professor as its only home” (273). The author advocates the role of alumni with careers outside the university as a crucial agent in this scattering of literary study “among the professions” (273) — one might object that the proposal has limited efficacy as a survival strategy for the profession itself.

The book’s conclusion, “Ratio Studiorum,” resuscitates the Latin phrase meaning curriculum in the optimistic conviction that its literal sense should encourage scholars and teachers of literature to “affirm the reason of literary study” (347). Guillory defines five rationales for that purpose: 1) Linguistic/Cognitive, 2) Moral/Judicial, 3) National/Cultural, 4) Aesthetic/Critical, and 5) Epistemic/Disciplinary. While he concedes that the first four stem from the classical and early modern periods, the fifth is recent, and it straightforwardly addresses certain existential anxieties about our profession: as most literary texts do not call for scholarly interpretation, and given the relative youth of our discipline, “it is not impossible to imagine that it might someday cease to exist” (379). In their relatively short life, literary studies have successfully contributed to a Baconian *advancement of learning*; they have also proved literature’s “interconnected[ness] with its social environment” and enhanced the ability to understand literature and take pleasure in it. Yet we profess and study literature “because we want to [and] because we have the resources to do so” (386). This admonition might turn into our best justification of “what we already do, and often do well” (XVI).

As one approaches Guillory’s wide-ranging, sometimes gargantuan

Professing Criticism from an Iberian/European setting and from the field of Early Modern studies, some topics are more appealing than others. Taking Guillory's warning against self-overestimation as some sort of Spenserian advice to "make a milde construction" of ourselves is a salutary move,¹ particularly as its nonchalance may help buttress resistance to curricular and assessment policies that have proved hostile to the humanities. More pertinent to Early Modern English studies in Portugal and Spain, Guillory's arguments both about the curriculum and the training and future of graduate students speak to the challenges that have guided SEDERI's twenty-first-century responses to the professionalizing demands of our discipline. About the former, one may see the expansion of SEDERI's initial Renaissance interests toward transnational and transmedial perspectives on Early Modern studies as witnessing an ongoing process of rethinking the tensions inherent in historical and geographical forms of otherness. About the latter, SEDERI's design of autonomous spaces for graduate research that may foster interaction with professional practice counts among those things we do, often do well, and still want to do better, despite the precariousness of our national systems for graduate studies. For these and other reasons, Guillory's volume offers us a sweeping prolegomenon to further descriptions, defenses, and redefinitions of every aspect of our profession.

References

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¹ "I commend to the world this smal Poëme, the which beseeching your La: to take in worth, and of all things therein according to your wontedness to make a milde construction" (Edmund Spenser, Dedicatory Epistle to *Muiopotmos*; in Spenser 1989, 412, my emphasis).