

María Jesús PÉREZ-JÁUREGUI, ed. 2023. *Henry Constable. The Complete Poems*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies

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Pérez-Jáuregui's remarkable edition of *Henry Constable. The Complete Poems* is a monument to an unjustly neglected poet and a tribute to the editor's unstinting, selfless devotion to her subject. It quite clearly surpasses in its scholarship and editorial procedures Joan Grundy's carping, octogenarian *The Poems of Henry Constable* (1960), and the proper response is one of grateful admiration. No praise will ever seem adequate; that the volume boasts the endorsements of Arthur F. Marotti and Steven W. May is perhaps the best index of its worth. In the Preface, Pérez-Jáuregui defines the work's fundamental aim as one of "restitution," of giving Constable his "due" as a writer of amatory, dedicatory, and religious sonnets (XIX). The singularly practical but highly exacting method she has chosen to pursue that aim is on the one hand to amass all available historical, biographical, textual, and literary-critical evidence and on the other to collate and make sense of a heterogeneous and piecemeal corpus of manuscript and printed sources. The result is that, far more than the complete poems, what Pérez-Jáuregui presents to the reader is Constable himself: every fiber of his historical and literary being has been painstakingly collected in what amounts to the next best thing to a physical resurrection.

And in all of this, Pérez-Jáuregui remains laudably dispassionate, commendably detached, deferring all protagonism to the poet who has for so long been cheated of it. The first chapter, "Henry Constable: A Biographical Account," eschews the "may/might/must-have" school of historiography in favor of scrupulous attention to the documentary facts. What emerges is the portrait of a well-connected young man who was on speaking terms with the major movers and shakers in around the English and Scottish courts but, never quite being in the right place at the right time and lacking, perhaps, the perquisite polish, never obtained the worldly grace he was equally anxious to achieve spiritually. However covert, his religion, naturally, didn't help

things: the time was not ripe for a Catholic loyalist, despite hopes pinned on James VI of Scotland, James I of England, with whom he was for a time on close terms. Unlike Henry IV of France, another personal acquaintance, who sagely jettisoned Protestantism for Catholicism, Constable's spiritual journey was in the politically wrong direction. The impression is that Constable was one of fortune's fools. In sonnet 42 he augurs monarchy over "a world of hearts" for the new-born daughter of Penelope Rich. The baby's premature death shortly afterwards enforced some awkward back-pedaling in sonnet 55. Pérez-Jáuregui notes: "Considering that Penelope had a total of nine children who survived infancy [...] Constable made an infelicitous choice of dedicatee" (314).

Chapters Two and Three offer an exhaustive overview of the contents and socioliterary histories of the amatory and dedicatory sonnets, and of the *Spiritual Sonnets*, respectively. As to the former, Pérez-Jáuregui's painstaking trawl in libraries and private collections on both sides of the Atlantic has turned up all manuscript and printed versions on the basis of which, after careful collation and Holmesian stemmatics, she not only expands the Constable canon to the tune of six new items (sonnets 15b, 32b, 60b, 64, 65, 66) but also establishes a plausible, intricate history of transmission which, in its turn, constitutes a fascinating metahistory of coterie and courtly culture in the late 1580s and early 1590s. The textual history of the *Spiritual Sonnets* is more straightforward. Unsurprisingly, they circulated less in manuscript form and were not printed until Thomas Park's *Heliconia* (1815), which included the seventeen sonnets in Harley MS 7553. It is to Pérez-Jáuregui's great credit that she has discovered a new manuscript version in Berkeley Castle containing a further four sonnets. As a result, the full canon of Constable's sonnets now amounts to eighty-seven poems.

Chapters Four and Five turn to literary-critical issues, the former addressing Constable's poetic praxis, the latter his critical reception. Constable's contribution to sonnet history is twofold, composing on the one hand one of the earliest amatory sequences in English and, on the other, one of the late sixteenth-century's "finest examples of devotional poetry," namely, the *Spiritual Sonnets*. Pérez-Jáuregui notes the obvious influence of Sidney, as well as Constable's pivotal position between him and Drayton, Barnabe Barnes, and Bartholomew Griffin; she also rightly brings to the fore Constable's particular indebtedness to French sonneteers Philippe Desportes. After a brief treatment of Constable's imagery, Pérez-Jáuregui deals at greater length

with the precedents and thematics of the *Spiritual Sonnets*, with the poet's treatment of monarchs earthly (Elizabeth I, James I and Mary Queen of Scots) and heavenly (the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene), and, more briefly again, with Catholic dogma in the sonnets. As for Constable's reception, early praise from Drayton, Jonson, and Edmund Bolton, who claimed no "Gentleman of our Nation [had] a more pure, quick, or higher Delivery of Conceit" (133), was followed by near oblivion until bibliographers made various attempts at establishing some sort of stable text in the nineteenth century. Critical appraisal had to wait until Sidney Lee's *Elizabethan Sonnets* (1904), but it was not until the current century and the so-called "Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies" (Jackson and Marotti 2004, qtd. 144) that Constable began to attract more sustained and in-depth critical attention.

Chapter 6, "The Present Edition," defines the canon of Constable's poems that is to follow and explains the selection of copy texts, editorial conventions, and the textual apparatus accompanying each poem. And then, after the magnificent prolegomena, Constable's poems finally make their appearance on page 157. Each sonnet, generously allocated a page to itself, is accompanied by a list of sources and textual variants, as well as a glossary of difficult or obscure words. The sixty-six amatory and dedicatory sonnets, ordered according to what Pérez-Jáuregui judges Constable's "final intentions" (149) to have been, precede the twenty-four *Spiritual Sonnets*. The poems are followed by ample "Explanatory Notes," providing historical and biographical information, references to poetic analogues, and ample quotations from vernacular and continental sources.

As if this were not enough, Pérez-Jáuregui provides a meticulous extended note giving a "Bibliographical Description of Main Textual Sources." Three appendixes contain two anonymous sonnets dedicated to Constable, a table comparing the arrangement of the secular sonnets in all sources, and another comparing the headings and arrangement of the *Spiritual Sonnets* in their two manuscript sources. The book is rounded off with an extensive bibliography, an index of manuscript sources, an index of first lines, and a thorough General Index. Pérez-Jáuregui's edition even makes room for eight full-page plates and, with its color jacket image (Palma il Giovane, *Venus and Mars*) and sewn binding, amounts to a very handsome publication.

In sonnet 50 a forlorn Constable writes, "If ever any justlye might complayne // of unrequited service, it is I." The question raised by

Pérez-Jáuregui's devoted service to Constable is not quite whether or not it is requited, but whether the poet deserves it. Self-denying in her editorial role, Pérez-Jáuregui is reticent about Constable's literary merits, but if anyone is qualified to offer an appraisal, it is surely her. The literary-historical interest of Constable's sonnets is beyond doubt and sufficiently justifies this edition; many of them also provide fascinating insight into late sixteenth-century courtly ritual and political events. But do they stand up as works of literature? The inclination of Pérez-Jáuregui's edition seems to be slightly towards the *Spiritual Sonnets*, but to this reader's mind the eminently religious undertow of many of the secular sonnets lends them a depth or an edge missing in the former and suggesting an alternative narrative to that of his "life-changing conversion to Catholicism" (105). The religion the younger Constable lived may have differed from the religion he officially declared, and his conversion may have been a "coming-out" rather than a road to Damascus. Those looking for a second Sidney will be disappointed, but there are scattered delights for readers who prefer to read the pangs of poetic labor rather than see them refined away to a more decorous, antiseptic quintessence. The antithesis of Sidneian poise and polish, Constable's sometimes morbid introspection and synapse-snapping conceits bespeak an unkempt personal gaucheness which may help account for their author's frustrations in a court requiring aristocratic élan and self-accomplished grace. Be that as it may, Pérez-Jáuregui's edition provides all the information future scholars and students of Constable could ever ask for and will be the starting-point for all subsequent analysis and assessment. That will be Pérez-Jáuregui's just requirement.

Pérez-Jáuregui speaks of the "joy of rediscovering and collating primary sources" (XX) dispersed across two continents. "Joy" and cognates is one of the commonest words in the New Testament; Constable may have known little enough of it in his lifetime, but this impeccable, informative, and genuinely scholarly edition should have him rejoicing at last among the seraphim he yearned to join.

References

- Jackson, Ken, and Arthur F. Marotti. 2004. "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies." *Criticism* 46: 167–90.
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How to cite this review: Jonathan P. A. Sell. Review of María Jesús Pérez-Jáuregui, ed. *Henry Constable. The Complete Poems* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2023). *SEDERI* 34 (2024): 121–125.

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