

BOOK REVIEW

JOANNA PICCIOTTO. **Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England**. Pp. 880.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. Hardback, \$54 (£39.95).

Joanna Picciotto's *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* represents the latest and perhaps most compelling attempt by a literary scholar to address the "labor of seeing" that Renaissance poets shared with experimentalists such as Robert Hooke, Robert Boyle, and Francis Bacon (100, 405). Picciotto's contribution to the study of experimentalist literature is both erudite, which is good, and daunting—spanning nearly 1000 pages, it wears its erudition heavily. Yet for all the study's intellectual and physical heft, its thesis is splendidly straightforward: that the advocacy of a new science in seventeenth-century England required a new understanding of the senses, one that not only spurred early modern poets into intellectual traffic with experimentalists but also enabled them "to reimagine the task of mimesis itself" (14).

In the opening chapters of Picciotto's study, Francis Bacon features prominently as an exemplary figure in the early modern labor of seeing. And for good reason. Caught between *cura* and *curio*, care and attraction, Bacon's confessed promotion of "curiosity" set out a precarious reinterpretation of humanity's fall and restoration, one in which the senses—physical requisites of both knowledge and sin—underwent a radical transvaluation. As Picciotto shows, Bacon turned to the Adamic act of naming, biblical exemplar of the primordial accord between the senses and things, as both typological forebear and ideological end. It was by looking backwards, in other words, that Bacon managed to reinstate curiosity in his advance toward nature.

This much at least is clear from *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). In the opening pages of the *Advancement*, Bacon turns to Adam and the Garden of Eden in order to dislodge the fruit of creation from humanity's carnal appetites. Standing in stark contrast to postlapsarian habits of induction, Adam's innocent curiosity represents a model of learning that has the potential, in Picciotto's reading, to reform consumption into "knowledge production" (20). Here is Bacon:

[I]t was not the pure knowledge of nature and universality, a knowledge by the light whereof man did give names unto other creatures in Paradise, as they were brought before him, according to their properties, which gave the occasion to the fall; but it was the proud knowledge of good and evil, with an intent in man to give law unto himself and to depend no more upon God's commandment, which was the form of the temptation.<sup>1</sup>

In a powerful reading of Bacon's distinction between "pure knowledge" and "proud knowledge," Picciotto argues that Bacon, and later Marvell and Milton, attributed "an apparent design flaw"—"the maladaptation of human perception to the scope of creation"—to original sin (198, 405). Consequently, Bacon's advocacy of a new science required a new understanding of the senses. "For created humanity," Picciotto writes, "divine worship was indistinguishable from working to satisfy the cognitive appetite" (37). By contrast, the question for fallen humanity is, "what

would an experience of creation prior to the distortions introduced by the corrupted mind and body be like?" (15).

It is this unique understanding of the "maladaptation" (405) of the fallen senses to the natural world, a view that left open the possibility of their improvement, that radically distinguished Bacon's reformist project from other, likeminded reformers who shared his zeal for returning to things themselves. After all, earlier figures such as Paracelsus had already denounced the bookishness of humanist learning in favor of the immediacy of the first book, the Book of Nature, which he proposed revealed the imprints—or "signatures"—of the divine *verbum dei*.<sup>2</sup> But whereas Paracelsus imagined the divine "signatures" to be accessible to humanity's exegetical practices, Bacon demurred, arguing instead that the stable link between signatures and the divine, signs and signified, had been lost. What was left to humanity were the senses, wayward and in need of reform. In effect, Bacon legitimated the advancement of learning by turning the sensitive body into a spectatorial body, that is, a medium of perpetual self-re-formation. "Cleansed of idolatrous attachment to concrete externals of place and time," Picciotto writes, "paradise was regained through the work of estrangement, or discovery: the production of alien experiences of the known world" (12).

In Picciotto's reading, Bacon conceived of scientific learning on the model of the first naturalist, Adam, as an ongoing "labor of seeing." Whereas the first half of Picciotto's book (labeled "Contexts") deals with this intellectual traffic, the second half (labeled "Texts") deals with the experimentalist literature of Donne, Burton, Marvell, and Milton (among others):

The specimens of literary experimentalism examined in this book are linked by a unity of intention ... what I call sensuous iconoclasm.... To guarantee the instability of their products, many [experimentalists] adopt[ed] a processual approach to imagery, invoking hierarchies only to invert or level them and employing constantly changing methods of mediation, often through perspectival metaphors. (16)

As heirs to the Adamic art of seeing, experimentalist poets labored toward an aesthetic re-education of the body—what Picciotto calls "sensuous iconoclasm." As the language of "instability" and "processual ... imagery" suggests, the point was not to regain paradise but rather to remake paradise in the present, by treating the poetic artifact as an instrument or technology for transforming human perception.

In what is perhaps the most controversial and consistent line of argumentation running throughout *Labors of Innocence*, Picciotto claims that the division between pre- and postlapsarian life (so often taken for granted in literary studies) is at best a naive rendering of paradisaical recovery, one that "confines traditional representations of paradise to a proleptic mode" and so misses the point that, for experimentalist poets, "the recovery of paradise and the reformation of public life were not separate things" (401). In chapter five, Picciotto extends this argument to Marvell's "The Garden," which she takes as an example of "sensuous iconoclasm" in extremis. "[I]n Marvell's poem, bliss consists in nothing but the innocent pleasures of clear-sightedness itself. Such clarity of sight results in 'quiet'—a quiet presented not as passivity but as the continual apocalypse or unveiling that innocent observation is" (371). While critics have long pointed to the iconoclastic tendencies of Milton and Marvell, what makes Picciotto's "sensuous iconoclasm" unique among entries in the history of literary iconoclasm is the proposition that (contra Stanley Fish) paradise and apocalypse, or innocence and knowledge, were not diametrical opposites—not even among the most puritan of work ethics. Rather, innocence and labor interwove to make paradise a potentiality—albeit an elusive potentiality—integral to what Picciotto conceives of as the early modern public sphere in England: "a corporate

body engaged in the labor of truth" (5). By emphasizing the poet's "processual approach" to "truth," Picciotto enables us to see the work of paradisaic recovery not as a proleptic labor but rather as a labor carried out repeatedly and intensively on the body and in the present:

The project of constructing an Adamic body, a body adequate to a real experience of the things God made, reprised the old conflict of body and soul as a dialectical tension between the fallen, "sensitive" body with which the experimentalist was saddled and the spectatorial body toward which he strived. In practice, the spectatorial body was recovered as his own body, improved by artificial enhancements, disciplined by new evidentiary cannons, absorbed into a collective subject of knowledge production, and directed to spiritual ends. (19-20)

There are, then, important qualifications to what "labor" can mean in Picciotto's study—qualifications we do well to consider. For although Picciotto grounds her understanding of the moral imperative to see and see clearly in a theory of the senses, she, like many other scholars interested in early modern public sphere theory, follows an essentially Habermasian strain of criticism that reads early modern self-fashioning and self-discipline as work aimed at maintaining strict bodily boundaries and eliminating suspect passions.<sup>3</sup> The body of the laborer, and thus the sensuousness of the labor, tend to fall out. So while Picciotto rightly interprets experimentalist poets alongside Baconian empiricism, she reduces the complexity of their labors to a flat deracination of the senses, leaving one to wonder about the sensate conditions (i.e., the non-visual conditions) from which this early modern georgic body—the so-called "spectatorial body"—is said to have emerged. In other words, how Picciotto might reconcile her argument with an alternative sensory economy, one that does not privilege vision over the other non-visual senses, and so does not entail the inevitability of a "spectatorial body" over, say, a tactile or audiovisual body, is not clear. It seems disappointing, given the emphasis on vision and bodily abstraction in *Labors of Innocence*, that the question is never raised.

And yet, my purpose here is neither to undermine nor to contradict Picciotto's study—far from it. The latter is far too sophisticated and complex, too rich in literary and historical detail, to allow for any simple contradiction. My point rather is to bring into focus one of the many argumentative strands in *Labors of Innocence* that might—from a different theoretical perspective—have been told otherwise. The fact that some scholars might disagree with Picciotto's decision to privilege the "spectatorial body" in no way diminishes the importance of her book's myriad findings.

*Labors of Innocence* is massive in both size and erudition, but I found as I read it that its entry points are many, and each one full of surprises. For the scholar of early modern science and technology studies, chapters three and five, "The Productive Eye" and "Instruments of Truth," will prove exhilarating; for the scholar of early modern social and political theory, the introduction, "The Intellectual's Two Bodies," and chapter one, "Digging up the Hortus Conclusus," are must reads. Finally, for the scholar of early modern English poetry, the final half of Picciotto's study ("Texts") is a real opportunity to encounter familiar works of poetry such as Marvell's "The Garden" and Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a wholly new light. For these reasons and others, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* represents a major resource for students and scholars of early modern English literature and intellectual history. To read it, as I suggest one must, is to undergo a labor of the very best kind.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 123.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Paracelsus, Bacon, and other naturalist reformers, see James Bono, *The Word of God and the Languages of Man: Interpreting Nature in Early Modern Science and Medicine: Ficino to Descartes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Habermas's influence on early modern scholarship, especially with regard to the senses, see James Kuzner, "Habermas Goes to Hell: Pleasure, Public Reason, and the Republicanism of *Paradise Lost*," *Criticism* 51.1 (Winter 2009): 105-145.