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J. K. Barret. *Untold Futures: Time and Literary Culture in Renaissance England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. Pp. 249. $55.00 (cloth).
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In *Untold Futures: Time and Literary Culture in Renaissance England*, J. K. Barret analyzes what we might call the "time signature" of key works from the English Renaissance. Barret considers peculiar literary moments in which characters imagine their own or other future selves looking back on the past—a past that is often the character's present. This scenario poses challenges that are not only temporal and imaginative but also often grammatical, legal, documentary, or material. What strictures bind the present when it invokes a past that has not yet happened? What is the force of what Barret calls "looking forward to looking back" (4)?

Barret's answers to these questions are manifold, and that is one of the many strengths of this thought-provoking, insightful, and carefully crafted book. Many books wield their theses in Procrustean fashion, but Barret stresses the variety of ways in which the authors she discusses imagine the future construction of past events. While she credits extra-literary factors with helping to shape early modern thinking about futurity, she does not argue any single factor to be determinative. At the heart of *Untold Futures*, then, is a challenge to familiar teleologies. Calvinist election, secularist science, the humanist recovery of antiquity: all are in play as these authors pose alternative conceptions of future time, but none of these developments explains early modern temporal consciousness as these literary works envision it. Barret instead credits literature itself for constructing new modes of temporality. Thus, Barret does not describe temporality in an ahistorical vacuum, what matters more than intellectual movements are literary elements such as the mood of a verb, the legibility of a manuscript, or the scripted rather than improvised performance.

In the first chapter, that literary element is the promise. A speech act that guarantees future retrospection, the promise in Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia* (c. 1580) significantly appears in the form of poetic verse. When Philoclea revisits verses she wrote in which she promised perpetual purity of mind, a pledge she has already broken, she exists in quite a different future than the one she promised for herself. The promise's incapacity to guarantee future action recurs in negative form in the romance's last books when Euarchus, having sentenced his son and nephew to death, refuses to reverse his judgment even when their identities are revealed. Barret argues this moment's significance lies in its breach of "narrative contract" (57), its denial of the revelation and reconciliation promised by romance. Barret argues for the value of this breach, in that—though tragic, and though overridden by the subsequent happy ending—it offers a free future that narrative expectations have tried to constrain.

Exactly *why* an unconstrained future should be valuable, especially when it propels the *Old Arcadia*'s heroes toward a tragic death sentence rather than a romantic reunion, is not a question that Barret answers in relation to Sidney. Matters become clearer in the chapter on the first edition of *The Faerie Queene* (1590), as Barret argues for poetic narrative's ability to shift the historical past itself from settled certainty to prospective contingency. Barret asserts that the poem scatters the history of Britain across a number of episodes—notably Arthur's reading of *Briton Moniments*, Merlin's prophecy of Britomart's future, and Britomart's insertion of England as "Troynovaunt" into Paridell's account of Aeneas—in order to make the experience of reading history non-linear: we aggregate these episodes, reading forward and backward, in a way that unsettles our sense of inevitable outcome. Edmund Spenser constantly ironizes *The Faerie Queene*'s claim to be an "antique history," since that history is always being reconceived and rewritten. For Barret, Spenser is tremendously optimistic about literature's capacity to project itself into the future and thence rewrite the past.

William Shakespeare, in contrast, depicts the dangers of fiction's vise grip on future action. Across three chapters, Barret considers Shakespearean views of literary outcome—and it is the most overtly literary that is the most defeatist. *Titus Andronicus*'s characters plot out revenge by

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using Ovid as a practical handbook for harm. Worse yet, they literalize Ovidian transformation in the form of mutilated human bodies. In Barret's subtle and fascinating reading, *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1588) stages a *sotto voce* critique of centuries' worth of training in reading the classics in moralizing fashion: the play parodies and ironizes reading the *Metamorphoses* as a spur to action. *Cymbeline* (c. 1611), in contrast, draws not from classical texts but from English's peculiar grammar to invent a narrative time that is "future perfect" (163): characters anticipate a future valuable for the stories that, in that prospective time, they will have been able to tell. Cleopatra, however, dreads seeing herself portrayed at Caesar's triumph by "saucy lictors" and "scald rhymers" because those comedians' extemporaneous performances, like the couplets of the ballads they sing, are all too predictable and reproducible (*Antony and Cleopatra*, c. 1607). Shakespeare associates the untrammeled future not with extemporaneous performance but with the kind of ekphrastic scripting that only Shakespeare himself can produce: Enobarbus's depiction of Cleopatra on her barge, or Iachimo's of the tapestry in Imogen's bedroom. The days of future past in which Shakespeare invests his theater require what John Keats would call a state of mind "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 1817).

In an epilogue, Barret contrasts Adam's initial postlapsarian hope to remain in Eden in a static eternity of mournful nostalgia with the wandering, inconclusive mode of romance with which *Paradise Lost* (1667) ends. I wished to hear more about how John Milton's epic crafts open-ended futurity. (One thinks of the multiple alternative worlds Satan bypasses, not stopping to ask who inhabits them.) Barret tends to focus intently on a few moments in each work rather than on larger structures and multiple incidents. But this is perhaps the point. A malleable future cannot be found everywhere in a literary work, for then we would know to expect it. And then we would have a narrative that imprisons itself rather than seeks *Paradise Lost*'s exit into a world of limitless, untold futures.

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Timothy Bolton. *Cnut the Great*. Yale English Monarchs. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. 272. $40.00 (cloth).
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In *Cnut the Great*, a much-needed biography of one of Anglo-Saxon England's most successful rulers, Timothy Bolton presents an accessible and thorough, if at times flawed, interpretation not just of Cnut's reign but of northwestern Europe, especially Scandinavia, during the late tenth and early to mid-eleventh centuries. After introducing the many and varied sources that inform our understanding of Cnut and the world in which he lived, Bolton begins, largely due to a lack of evidence for his subject's childhood years, with an overview of Danish society in the tenth and eleventh centuries. By examining the family that came to dominate southern Denmark in the tenth century, Bolton establishes the power and precarity of the dynasty built up by Cnut's grandfather, Harald, and father, Swen.

An account of the conquest of England by Cnut's father follows. Here Bolton presents a readable synthesis of earlier scholarship, emphasizing the formative nature of the events of 1013 on the young Cnut, and his skill and fortune in 1016, when he conquered England. Bolton delves into the charter material and skaldic verse to show how Cnut skillfully handled the "mare's nest" (93) of competing interests at his court, rewarding some through

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