

JOURNAL of the NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

<http://northernrenaissance.org> | ISSN: 1759-3085



Published under an Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported Creative Commons License.

You are free to share, copy and transmit this work under the following conditions:

- Attribution — You must attribute the work to the author, and you must at all times acknowledge the Journal of the Northern Renaissance as the original place of publication (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Scott L. Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs Beyond the Tomb*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. ISBN 978-0-230-20325-9. Xiv + 228 pp., 13 b/w ill. Hbk. £50.00

Reviewed by Angus Vine

[1] In the second part of *Don Quixote* (1615) Miguel de Cervantes's eponymous hero plumbs the depths of the miraculous cave of Montesinos. What the Don sees underground is wondrous indeed: a crystalline palace, an alabaster hall, and finally a marble tomb of exquisite craft, upon which lies not a carved figure, but preternaturally preserved flesh and bones. Don Quixote's vision in the cave is important for all sorts of reasons. For one thing, it is an early, and remarkable, episode of speluncean literature. For another, it speaks of the author's interest, sometimes parodic, in fact and fiction, curiosity and wonder, imagination and vision. But it is also important because it centres on a tomb. For tombs in early modern Europe, Catholic and Protestant, were big business. And if tombs were important, the epitaphs carved on them, as Scott Newstok reminds us in his recent book, were even more so. In *Don Quixote* the tomb is unadorned, as the knight, Durandarte, lies enchanted and perfectly preserved. But in general in the early modern period it was epitaphs that preserved the memory of the dead, not Merlin's magic or some other enchantment. As William Camden put it in 1600, in an essay on epitaphs from which Newstok quotes, '*epitaphes* have alwayes bene most respected, for in them love was shewed to the deceased, memory was continued to posterity, friends were comforted, and the reader put in mind of humane frailty'. To paraphrase Propertius, verse preserves, where bronze and marble merely deceive.



[2] Thanks to the work of Nigel Llewellyn, Peter Sherlock, and others, we know now quite how important funerary monuments were in the early modern period for the preservation of memory, for comfort to the living and honour to the dead. We also know much more about the *memento mori* and the epitaph itself. Where Newstok adds to this knowledge is in his intriguing argument that in the sixteenth century 'literature *in* the graveyard—epitaphs—became literature *of* the graveyard; that is, writing that began insistently "here", as inscriptions *on* tombstones, often appeared as citations *within* other texts' (1). As he later points out, previous studies of the epitaph have overlooked 'the fascinating ways in which writers have re-*cited* and re-*sited* (as in re-*situated*) these texts within new contexts' (4). The implication here of a shift from a material memorial culture, where tombs and gravestones are the important things, to a textual one, where books and poems predominate, is a fascinating one, and one that Newstok convincingly connects with the post-Reformation context in a fine and informative introduction. His central point there is that a Protestant 'preoccupation with textual remembrance led to a saturation of epitaphs in all kinds of printed circumstances' (28), and he presents plenty of evidence to support this, from the epitaphic titles of certain seventeenth-century sermons to the increasingly detailed instructions over epitaphs included in peoples' wills.

[3] It is a pity, therefore, that this Reformation argument is essentially laid aside in the rest

of the book. The chapters that follow instead take in turn one of what Newstok describes as ‘a selective but representative range of Elizabethan genres: dramatic scripts, a political speech, treatises on rhetoric and poetics, historical chronicles, and elegiac verses’ (28). The connections of some of these genres with epitaphs are not always as apparent as Newstok thinks. And this generic approach also leads to some curious omissions. In his introduction Newstok acknowledges that this new interest in epitaphic writing coincided with the rise of antiquarianism and its wish to reconstruct English history and make the dead speak. It is strange, therefore, that he does not include a chapter on the antiquaries or antiquarianism. Camden and John Weever do get a brief look in, but neither is afforded the attention that their works so obviously merit. Weever’s *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), admittedly not the most fascinating work in English literary history, is dispensed with in just two pages (104–6), while Camden’s guide to the tombs and epitaphs in *Westminster Abbey, Reges, reginæ, nobiles & alij in Ecclesia Collegiata B. Petri Westmonasterij sepulti* (1600), is not discussed at all. These omissions result in strange emphases and may leave a reader, who is new to the field of epigraphy, struggling to grasp exactly what the early modern period understood by an epitaph or inscription.

[4] The book’s first chapter, “‘Here lies’: Pointing to the ‘Graue Forme’”, offers a microcosm of some of its problems. The chapter arises from the key epitaphic formula ‘Here lies’ (*hic iacet*), as Newstok explores what he calls the inherently *locative* nature of the epitaph as captured in those words. This is an important point, and one that fits well with his fine argument in the introduction about the new textuality of Protestant culture. But this argument is weakened by the chapter paying insufficient regard to material culture and the surfaces or paper on which epitaphs were carved or written. Newstok cites admiringly the work of Juliet Fleming on graffiti (43), but he does not seem to share her enthusiasm for bodies, walls, printers, and ink. This is a shame and another, slightly strange omission. After all, if the place of epitaphs is what matters—and Newstok makes this case convincingly—then we really do need to hear a bit more about that place. By the same token, if Newstok is right that there is a shift from the monument to the text—and again he makes the case convincingly—then surely we should hear more about those collections in which textual epitaphs were copied and circulated. This means Camden and Weever, but also continental collections such as Jan Gruter’s enormous *Inscriptiones antiquæ totius orbi Romani*, printed at Heidelberg in 1602–3, and well known and well thumbed in early modern England. It also means manuscript culture, something which Newstok overlooks altogether. Why did people collect epitaphs, where did they copy them, how did they organise them? These are questions that still await their answers.

[5] The strongest chapters in the book are those on chronicles and drama. In the first of these, “‘In good stead of an epitaph’: Verifying History”, there is a fascinating argument about what Newstok calls the two truths of epitaphs, ‘the certifiable or documentary mode and the laudatory or moral mode’ (96). Newstok shows that, on the one hand, historical writers at the time took epitaphs to represent an evidentiary truth, and presumed them not to mislead in their essential facts, but that, on the other, they were rhetorical compositions, often written to convey the loss of the survivors, and could therefore result in ‘a somewhat glossily revised account of the life’ (87). This leads, as he points out, to a curious tension between the documentary and the declamatory. This is an excellent point, and one that illustrates why epitaphs were of such interest to both chroniclers and narrative historians, such as William Harrison and Raphael Holinshed, and antiquaries, such as Camden and

Robert Cotton. The chapter also contains a fine discussion of epitaphs which are no longer extant (or even which never existed), and the ways in which early modern writers spent much of their time reconstructing lost or defaced inscriptions in their monumental volumes. Anyone familiar with the activities of early modern antiquaries will recognise the importance of the discussion here.

[6] Scholars will also find chapter 5, “‘An theater of morality’: In Sincerity, Onstage”, useful. Newstok begins here by reflecting how often epitaphs are invoked in early modern drama, noting that there are ‘over one hundred early modern plays in which a character reads, encounters, composes, imagines, or otherwise alludes to an epitaph on stage’ (149). He then answers the inevitable questions of ‘why are they used so frequently, and in what manner’. In answering these, he makes a fine point here, for instance, about *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587?), showing how Kyd presents Hieronimo in the final act as a kind of frustrated writer of epitaphs for his son Horatio. In general, the chapter successfully blends this kind of close reading of particular dramatic texts with a larger argument about the tension between the *supposed* sincerity of epitaphs as records of an individual and of grief and the *perceived* artifice of the theatre.

[7] Newstok should also be commended for the sheer range of literary and historical references that he brings to bear in the book, as he effectively demonstrates the wide influence of epitaphic writing and thought in the early modern period. Future scholars will therefore find his bibliography particularly useful. Much of the material is unexpected, and a great deal is unfamiliar. The book is also well illustrated, with images of tombs and title-pages, and elegies and epitaphs. However, the downside of this range is that Newstok’s discussion can sometimes be rather superficial. At various points the book would have benefitted from the author spending more time and explaining things more slowly. In a similar vein, the book would also have benefitted from a less heavy, but more precise, use of footnotes. Material is often relegated to a footnote, which would be much better incorporated in the body of the book and discussed more fully. This would have given a greater richness and texture, and enabled Newstok to match his impressive breadth of reference with a similar depth. These presentational issues perhaps reflect the origins of the book in a Ph.D. thesis. They are therefore entirely understandable, but this reader at least would have liked more text and less note. The same goes for the book’s many breaks and divisions. Does an introduction, for instance, really need fourteen separate sections?

[8] Despite the reservations outlined above, Newstok has found an important subject and an interesting approach in his book. It is a shame therefore that *Quoting Death in Early Modern England* does not quite fulfil the promise of its introduction and some of its chapters. The question of emphasis is the main issue here. The author himself acknowledges this in the last chapter, “‘Lapping-up of Matter’: Epitaphic Closure in Elegies”, when he admits that there is ‘something perverse, on first glance, at delaying the most “literary” analysis until the conclusion’ (169). Few readers would disagree, and the book would surely have been improved if it had looked at more poetic epitaphs and sooner. Newstok’s insights into epitaphic influences are undoubtedly useful and original. But they would have been even more valuable if he had told us a bit more about actual epitaphs, memorials, and inscriptions. Even in Protestant England memorials mattered, and the epitaph, contrary to what one might think after reading this book, was not *always* metaphorical. Thus, despite not always being the most reliable narrator, Newstok would

have done well to learn from Don Quixote and his curious vision in the Castilian cave.

University of Sussex, July 2010