



PROJECT MUSE®

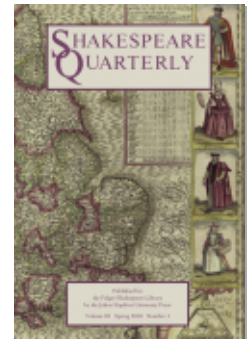
---

*Untold Futures: Time and Literary Culture in Renaissance  
England* by J. K. Barret (review)

William Junker

Shakespeare Quarterly, Volume 69, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 65-66  
(Review)

Published by Oxford University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2018.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698937>

*Untold Futures: Time and Literary Culture in Renaissance England.* By J. K. BARRET. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016. Illus. Pp. xiv + 250. \$55.00 cloth.

Reviewed by WILLIAM JUNKER

*Untold Futures* examines ways of imagining the future in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*; Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Cymbeline*; and (in a coda) Milton's *Paradise Lost*. These imagined futures are *untold* futures, Barret argues, because their very existence is occluded by the two terms of periodization that have been used to categorize sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature: the "Renaissance" and the "early modern." The category of the "Renaissance," Barret explains, denies the relevancy of these imagined futures by "anchor[ing] the period" as a whole "solely in reference to one particular [classical] past" and by reductively predicating "literary imitation on loss [of] or alienation" from this past (6). The category of the "early modern," which in contrast to the Renaissance is expressly future-oriented, is similarly reductive because it collapses the many different futures imagined in the period into the "one particular" future of "modernity" (6). *Untold Futures* thus seeks to give voice to those futures that have been silenced by the historical categories of modern scholarship.

The untold futures Barret is most keen to explore are those that take shape in and through the experience of "imaginative making" (18) or "artistic production" (11). For this reason, the "concepts of time" (10) that inform her readings are traced out "from [the] literary works" (10) themselves, not provided in advance by the "extraliterary sources" better known as historical contexts (11). Barret's critical approach is predicated on her belief that "the knowledge that literature produces need not be subordinated to any particular explanatory framework" (10)—any other particular discourse—but can stand on its own as something new and irreducible. The knowledge unique to literature, Barret argues, is most often produced (and discovered) at the level of a literary work's smallest organizational units: its "microstructures" (16). Microstructures are best thought of as highly specific and somewhat idiosyncratic formal mechanisms through which an act of poetic thinking works itself out. Examples include prophetic and promissory speech-acts in *The Old Arcadia*, "forward-moving backward glances" in *The Faerie Queene* (63), modes of allegoresis in *Titus Andronicus*, the use of the future perfect tense in *Cymbeline*, the temporality of triumph and rhyme in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and allusive ekphrasis in *Cymbeline* again.

From these literary microstructures, *Untold Futures* traces out visions of the future that complicate standard accounts of the period. The first chapter, on "Promising the Future," shows how the plot of Sidney's *Old Arcadia* undermines the singular, fixed, and predetermined future toward which the prophecies and promises of its characters aspire, and projects instead a future that is open-ended, retrospective, and full of "boundless possibility" (61). Chapter 2, on "The History of the Future" in *The Faerie Queene*, demonstrates how "the image of a character moving forward while looking back" is a narrative model for Spenser's "poetic treat-

ment of national history" as a whole, which "discovers and invents a future enabled by a retrospective, even backward-headed, process and prospect" (63). The upshot of both chapters is that "Sidney's and Spenser's fictions work to destabilize the mechanisms upon which secure and dependable teleologies depend"—such as prophecy, promise, contract, and providence—and develop in their place futures inspired by the freedom and contingency of artistic production itself (104).

The second half of *Untold Futures* turns to Shakespeare. Chapter 3, on "The Fiction of the Future," shows how the violent action in *Titus Andronicus* is in part a function of the "reductive [moralized] reading practices" of its characters, who are unable to envision any future action of their own except as predetermined by classical precedent, and by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular (134). Barret links these reading practices to moralizing exercises of sixteenth-century English schoolrooms and (less convincingly) to medieval Christian allegoresis in general. The "deterministic overreading" (145) of the literary past critiqued in *Titus Andronicus* leads to a different set of "strategies for its reappropriation in Shakespeare's later Roman plays" (146). Chapter 4, on "Shakespeare's Second Future" in *Cymbeline*, shows that the grammatical category of the future perfect (or second future), in which a future action is contemplated from the perspective of a still further future (as something somebody "will have done" [163]), opens up a "uniquely open-ended and non-apocalyptic" temporality that Barret calls "anticipatory nostalgia" (167). This temporality structures the imagination of Guiderius and Arviragus, who look forward to a future they will fill up with the retrospective narration of their past. They do not specify the contents of this future, simply its form: they aspire only to lives that will be worth retelling, whatever course these lives happen to take. In this way "the brothers . . . provide an index of what artistic production works to advance" (176). Chapter 5, which treats "Imminent Futures" in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline*, argues that through her suicide Cleopatra escapes a future in which she would be subjected to the extemporal performance of others by returning her to "an immortalizing, mythic past" of her own making (196). The chapter also shows that Cleopatra's triumphal return to Cydnus is vouchsafed by Shakespeare himself, who reinscribes her famous meeting with Antony into the text of his later play *Cymbeline*. Iachimo's description of the Cleopatra found in Imogen's bedroom is an ekphrasis not of any visual image, but of Shakespeare's poetic representation of the same scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In other words, Shakespeare "offers his own body of work as a replacement for classical sources," and so "render[s] the ancient past subordinate to the literary enterprise of his own present moment" (179, 180).

*Untold Futures* is a smart and daring work of scholarship that speaks to some of the most pressing issues in the study of sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature today. Barret's argument ties together a novel critique of periodization with a sophisticated recuperation of the aesthetic, and her style of argumentation realizes an alternative critical model to the historicism that has long held sway over the field. *Untold Futures* should be read by anybody for whom the "literary" in literary history still makes a difference, and should be required to be read by everybody for whom it does not.