

Book Review

Besieged: Early Modern British Siege Literature, 1642-1722.

Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson. McGill-Queen's UP, 2021.

\$80.00 CAD, 336 pp.

Reviewed by Lori A. Davis Perry, United States Air Force Academy

Our literary interests as scholars frequently arise from our lived experiences within cultures, including war and its aftermaths. Periods of relative peace and prosperity dull the poet's obligation to bear witness, the reader's compulsion to re-live, or the literary critic's attentiveness to the structure, purposes, generic stresses, or impact of war literature as it concerns war itself without apology. War has always generated creative literary responses, from the *Iliad* to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. But literary critics often approach the "war" elements of war as secondary to primary interests, such as plot or character. Decades of expeditionary warfare by the United States, and the rising surge of war fiction and poetry from contemporary authors has, perhaps not surprisingly, increased scholarly interest in war literature as a disciplinary specialty in its own right. Nevertheless, contemporary literature has yielded more critical attention. Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson offer a fresh and insightful analysis of an often overlooked motif in early modern war literature, the motif of the siege.

Alker and Nelson argue that the siege, particularly the city siege, was prominent in British literature between 1642 and 1722 because it held particularly powerful emotional, intellectual, and cultural fascination for people at all levels of society, a fascination they term "talismanic" power. They argue that the imaginative power of the siege exists across generic boundaries;

they thus turn their attention not to a subset of genres but to a type of spatial motif, “the locus of siege warfare.” Sieges and their impacts had appeared in a long tradition of literature, stretching back to Homer. But most accounts of sieges lacked the immediacy—and terror—of sieges experienced firsthand, a cultural trauma that retained its potency for several generations. Alker and Nelson note that sieges, and the Civil War itself, coincided with tremendous social and political changes, so that sieges became liminal spaces, both physically and metaphorically. Imagined siege space, they argue, “helped to represent a nation stumbling toward modernity, toward shifts in the way power, authority, and stability could be envisioned in the face of sociopolitical discord, division, and uncertainty in the decades following the Restoration.” Siege literature responds not simply to physical trauma specific to war, but the psychological and social confusion created while transitioning to an emerging modern world—how one should or should not organize national space, where or with whom civic authority should reside, or what proper relationships should exist between military professionals and civilians, the aristocracy and townspeople, or even men and women. Most significantly, siege literature played a significant role in a cultural shift that inevitably demythologized traditional heroic space, as the lack of heroic action in a siege, as well as the reliance upon skilled, practical engineering, destabilizes traditional heroic narratives. Alker and Nelson argue furthermore that siege literature did not simply influence the revolution in literary forms between 1640 and 1660, but also strained the genres available to authors, sometimes with generative effect.

Besieged consists of six chapters, each focusing on specific genres in which the siege motif plays an emotionally and intellectually significant role. In the first chapter, Alker and Nelson focus on documentary-like genres such as military diaries, letters, and memoirs, forms constrained by the language of authenticity and accuracy, with special attention paid to

informational networks and the generic adjustments created by Defoe when he fictionalized military history in the early eighteenth century. Chapters two and three examine the siege drama, a genre popular enough to sustain its own in-depth study. Chapter two argues that Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida*, uses the siege motif to develop an anti-heroic play that foregrounds the brutality and senselessness of war, while the Restoration drama of Davenant and Dryden, with its royalist perspective, recasts the siege play altogether for the purpose of reaffirming the power of the monarchy and the state. Surprisingly for royalist drama, Davenant and Dryden reinterpret city space as encompassing far more than aristocratic heroes. Chapter three examines later playwrights, including former military officer John Mitchelburne's genre-bending play *Ireland Preserv'd: or the Siege of Londonderry* (1705), who continue to reimagine urban space by emphasizing collaborative tactical and military action by the citizens and town leaders, including the working class and even women. These representations undermine the individually heroic roles of kings and nobles, laying important groundwork for the everyman perspective of the early modern novel.

The second half of the book turns to a variety of poetic representations of the siege, beginning with balladry and popular verse and then turning to formal poetry. Unlike the siege drama, which altered considerably over time, the siege ballad remained an unusually stable genre. Alker and Nelson theorize five recognizable "figures, features, and functions:" the journalistic style, the invitation to readers to participate in the war, the reliance upon heroic military figures in the construction of national identity, the military courage exhibited by the soldiers on the "right side" of the siege under question, and fantasies about the spectacular destruction of the enemy. In the next chapter they turn their attention to more formal modes and forms, such as the epic, elegy, panegyric, ode, allegory, and satire. Here they argue that

siege poetry becomes more experimental, leading to a renegotiation of generic forms. They also examine antiheroic siege poetry, particularly in light of failed military sieges in Europe in which British military forces fell short of heroic ideals while simultaneously suffering heavy losses and depleting the national treasury. The final chapter analyzes primarily prose fiction of the period, although it also includes an extensive investigation of John Bunyan's long allegorical narrative *The Holy War*.

Alker and Nelson deploy a sophisticated critical apparatus throughout, whether they are revisiting the work of earlier critics or forging new critical ground altogether. The literary effects of the British Civil War have been the subject of critical inquiry in the past, but their emphasis on the siege motif is relatively new. The literature of the period takes center stage, but while literary criticism remains the focus, the work is steeped in the historical, social, military, and political realities of the period, and for this reason must appeal to a wide swath of professional humanists. Due to the variety of literary texts, the authors must clarify and employ multiple critical methodologies, such as rhetorical theory, poetics, and literary history. Yet the book as a whole maintains a unified argument, with a focus on the poetics of space and the spatial implications of the siege itself. Through their analysis of a motif rather than a single genre, Alker and Nelson are able to construct an in-depth and compelling argument for the cultural potency of the siege that lasts for several generations after the Restoration.

The intended readers are clearly academic professionals who have access to many of the primary materials in university libraries. Fresh critical readings of primary works, such as Shakespeare's *Croilus and Tressida*, could both inform pedagogical approaches in university classrooms and spur scholarly interest as stand-alone readings. The book is not intended as an encyclopedic climax to all the critical investigations of siege literature, but as an invitation,

complete with a foundational framework, for scholars who wish to expand the conversation about sieges, the potency of their appeal to readers, and the cultural implications of sieges in literature across periods. Alker and Nelson have established a clear critical baseline, written a foundational critical text, and contributed an important perspective to the literature of early modern Britain.

About the Authors: Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson are long-term collaborators who have co-edited a book collection, *James Hogg and the Literary Marketplace: Scottish Romanticism and the Working-Class Author*, and have co-edited, with Leith Davis, an essay collection on Robert Burns. They collaborated in establishing the Defoe Society and they are currently collaborating on a critical edition, "The Uncollected Works of James Hogg."

Sharon Alker is the Mary A. Denny Professor of English and General Studies at Whitman College. For several years she served as the Director of the Defoe Society and the current Chair of the James Hogg Society. She has published articles on Shakespeare, Mary Brunton, Tobias Smollett, and John Arbuthnot. In addition to her work with Holly Faith Nelson, she is currently working on an Edinburgh UP edition of John Galt's *Sir Andrew Wylie of that ilk*.

Holly Faith Nelson is a Professor of English and Co-Director of the Gender Studies Institute at Trinity Western University. She has co-edited nine books, and her articles have appeared in journals such as *Studies in English Literature*, *Studies in Philology*, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, *English Language Notes*, the *George Herbert Journal*, *Connotations*, *Scintilla*, *Studies in Hogg and his World*, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, and a wide range of academic essay collections on literature or gender. She co-founded and edited for eight years (with Katherine Ellison) *Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe & His Contemporaries*, an online, peer-reviewed, multi-media scholarly journal. She serves as the current editor of the peer-reviewed

print journal *Studies in Hogg and his World*, and established and maintains the James Hogg Blog. In addition to her work with Sharon Alker, she is currently working on two more volumes: "Borderlands: The Art and Scholarship of Louise Imogen Guiney" (with Jonathan Nauman) and "Religion and (Proto) Feminism in Early Modern Women's Lives and Works, 1500-1800" (with Andrea Johnson).