The Ludic Self in Seventeenth-Century English Literature. By Anna K. Nardo. Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991. ISBN 0-7914-0722-5. Pp. x + 263. $49.50 (cloth), $16.95 (paper).

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Article:

The analysis of plays like the dissection of one's playmate, promises to increase our knowledge, but at a certain cost. Anyone seriously discussing something called "play theory" risks being alternately soporific and ridiculous—droning polysyllabically about hopscotch or, dressed in a labcoat, taking down Touchstone's speeches in conscientious shorthand. Happily, Anna K. Nardo has run these risks successfully, pursuing the "ludic" without becoming ludicrous; in fact, in a day when muc theoretically explicit criticism neither teaches nor delights, her book does both. Her achievement is yet more impressive because the authors of whom she writes— Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Burton, and Browne—present a daunting breadth of modes, genres, styles, and topics, and have occasioned an even more daunting amount of critical discussion; yet, having mastered such a body of material, she wears her learning lightly, writing with a grace and wit appropriate to her subjects.

Nardo's thesis is that play, especially literary play, offered this array of seventeenth-century figures "a way to live within the contradictions and conflicts of their experience. They found in play a new stance for the self" (3). Thus she both develops and modifies the earlier claims of Leah Sinanoglou Marcus in *Childhood and Cultural Despair* (1978). She begins, like Marcus, from the real and perceived social upheaval in England between 1600 and 1660—decades which brought religious schism, civil war, revolution, and regicide—and notes along with Marcus the flowering in this period of literary gamesters, madcaps, and infantiles. However while Marcus focuses on the (supposedly) regressive longings of Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne for a reconstituted childhood playground *away from* chaos, Nardo claims that a "ludic self' allowed her "liminal men" to define some sort of new space *amidst* the flux—"to stand, *without retreating,* in the midst of difficult dilemmas" (my emphasis). Similarly, Nardo disagrees with some Marxist and cultural materialist critics (and also, ironically, with King James I) who see medieval and Renaissance play—fools, fairs, festivals, etc.—as uniformly conservative, containing and marginalizing dissent. Rather, says Nardo, "out ofludic disorder may come the potential for social change" as "society discovers the arbitrariness of its structure and plays with even bizarre alternatives" (37).

Nardo has assembled her theoretical basis from a variety of sources, but this amalgam is cohesive and usually supports the weight of her claims. For a definition of "play" she turns to Johan Huizinga, Gregory Bateson, Ervin g Goffman, and Mihal Czikszentmihalyi, all of whom, more or less, see play as any limited, rule-governed, "framed" activity, including mimicry, fantasy, drama, competitive games and sports These limits and rules, Nardo continues, are supposed to remind the players continually that "it's only a game"; however, the particularly well designed game can "create a microcosm, a secondary world, which takes on a separate 'reality' so compelling that players sometimes forget their paradoxical position" (11). So it is, says Nardo, especially in times of social instability, that "ludic" activity can become a staging ground for real psychic reconstruction and social action. In Dickinson's words, sometimes play "proves piercing earnest."

Nardo gives these definitions in her opening chapters and here also delineates the "self' which, according to D. W. Winnicott, Margaret Mahler, and Heinz Kohut originates when the infant separates psychically from his or her "caregivers" while "internaliz[ing] cultural codes" (5). (It is in this first chapter that Nardo's argument comes closest to being obscured by sometimes dehumanizing technical jargon from other disciplines.) In the next chapter she turns to the example of *Hamlet.* Here she provides a fresh reading of the drama that combines the insights of child development theory, play theory, and theological criticism. Punning on Claudius's words, she sees both Hamlet and Ophelia as being "on double business bound"—that is, as being caught in familial "double binds." The ghost of Hamlet's father gives him two contradictory commands: revenge my murder and avenge your mother's incest; do so without depraving yourself or hurting your mother. Polonius puts his daughter in a double bind as well: maintain your maiden innocence by rejecting Hamlet's attentions; sell yourself at a "higher rate" to Hamlet, perhaps winning a queenship—be a virgin, be a whore. In this impossible situation Hamlet preserves his sanity by playing: playing mad, playing dramatic director, playing revenge hero. Finally, Hamlet resolves his dilemma by resorting to the wisdom of a higher Father—God Himself—and placing himself entirely in the hand of Providence. However, Ophelia has not developed a sufficiently strong self through play (or prayer), so she simply goes mad.

The third chapters "Play and Historical Process," discusses the "most profoundl felt contradiction" of seventeenth-century life, also in terms of child development: "the clash between a conservative ideology inculcated by child-rearing practices and an incongruent historical reality" (35). In other wordss says Nardo, children were being reared in keeping with a static, hierarchical medieval order (with its occasional ludic interruptions) while this order was crumbling outside the regimented walls of home and school. Nardo goes into harrowing detail about the rigid, authoritarian nature of this nurture—children flogged and separated from parents at young ages to prevent excessive affection, boys drilled in martial arts and manly Latin to supplant women's ways and the "Mother Tongue"—all summed up with the plaintive words of young Lady Jane Grey: "I think myself in hell" (40). Frankly, I find the picture painted here so unrelievedly negative as to arouse skep-ticism, Still, the general outline of Nardo's account is compelling, and, when children raised in this way encountered a chaotic reality, it is not surprising that, like Ophelia and Hamlet, they responded either by going really mad or by "relocating the self" (45). It is to such relocations that the remainder of the book is devoted.

Chapter 4, "John Donne at Play in Between," accounts more fully for the paradox frequently noted by Donne's readers: his "simultaneous fears of separation from and possession by a beloved—whether a woman or God" (49). According to Nardo, Donne obsessively adopts liminal, in-between personae—ironic lover, Chris tian skeptic, "hermaphrodite" priest, rebellious worshipper—because of his marginal upbringing as a Catholic in virulently anti-Catholic England. It is by uneasily separating from his mother church that he differentiates a self—like the toddler discovering "NO!"—but he is unable fully to embrace the Protestant alternative. So to *be* a self, for Donne, is to be "in between," playing out his self-confessed "riddlin disposition." Family history meets national history in a unique way.

Chapter 5, "George Herbert Pulling for Prime," sees the poet's upbringing as shaping him in a different way. Herbert came from a large family of competitive, "choleric" men—duelers, soldiers, sailors, diplomats, and courtiers—who established their identities in high-risk activities that merged work with play. Herbert himself excelled as University Orator at Cambridge, "an all-male world structured around ritualized [verbal] combat" (82), and these word games, while differentiating the combatants, also promoted closeness among them as each was compelled to mimic and internalize the opponent's qualities. So, says Nardo, did Herbert learn to talk to God. Herbert's devotional poems are often rhetorically risky "engines against th'Almighty" which assume that, if the believer wagers everything on his prayerful, poetic assault, the rule of the game is "most take all"—winner take all. In other words, to win God's presence is to have everything else into the bargain. Nardo underscores her claims by highlighting the frequency of Herbert's references to Primero, a predecessor of poker in which the most daring move was to "pull for prime"—to go for broke.

It is necessary to demur somewhat at Nardo's handling of theology, especially in her discussion of Herbert. For her, Herbert's God seems to be ultimately "a projection of his interior other, a nurturing, ordering Presence"

(84). Granted, we tend as sinners to worship gods in our own image (this is the essence of idolatry); yet Christians know a God who is first and foremost the Creator, who exists before and above and outside uss who calls us into existence by His sovereign power, who can make and unmake us and all things with a single word—as Herbert says, "Thy word is all, if we could spell." Nardo's language virtually eliminates Herbert's sense of God's transcendence, which is what gives God's loving immanence its meaning. Not surprisingly then, she tends also to neglect Protestantism as a distinct and coherent worldview, treating it rather as an uneasy transitional stage between static, communal medievalism and dynamic, individualistic modernism. As an analogue to Herbert's playful God, she invokes (plausibly) modern Catholic theologian Hugo Rahner but overlooks the most obvious analogue (and near-contemporary source), Martin Luther.

Nevertheless, when Nardo's developmental models are operating within the human sphere, they continue to produce many fruitful insights. The succeeding chapters on Andrew Marvell, Robert Burton, and Sir Thomas Browne ring fascinating changes on her theme of self-definition through play: Marvell, the maddeningly private chameleon, fulfills the very public diplomatic mission of negotiating ethically between two regimes and eras; Burton, the marginalized university professor, plays his way out of the melancholy brought on by the collapse of a monistic epistemology by speaking to opposing sides of every question; and Browne, the doctor and nascent scientist, uses humor as a weapon against factual error and praises both empirical and metaphorical ways to truth. Nardo then concludes by glancing at the differences between early Renaissance "folly" (Rabelais, Erasmus, More, Shakespeare, Cervantes) and modern "leisure" (Walton's *The Compleat Angler).* These two concepts frame the seventeenth-century "ludic self' and are as different as a community of Rabelaisean feast-day revellers, on the one hand, and Walton's individualistic, isolated anglers, on the other. In between are the "liminal men" who neither rebel nor retreat but stay to play.