Review Essay: Lauro Martines, *Society and History in English Renaissance Verse*

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in Rome. Male’s ability to see connections is amazing; he remembers everything he has seen and becomes a walking encyclopedia of architectural details. Mont-Saint-Michel next merits his attention as the epitome of the developing styles from Romanesque to Gothic. The choir, completed in 1521, is the crowning achievement of the great examples of the past surrounding it. This one site offers a compact history of almost five hundred years of architecture, resulting in a work of harmony and beauty greater even than its separate parts.

Studies on other details of architecture follow: Male compares the tympana of Notre-Dame of Paris and Chartres; he traces the influence of the Senlis portal; and he recalls the contrast between Rheims Cathedral before and after the bombardments of World War I. The art critic’s originality appears in his reconstruction of the lost frescoes on the life of St. Louis in the church of the Cordeliers through the miniatures in the Book of Hours by Jean Pucelle, now in the Cloisters Collection in New York City. His reclamation of Jean Bourdichon as an important late Gothic painter is convincingly argued through parallel images in various manuscripts. From illumination, Male turns in his final essays to stained glass and works of ivory.

In his artistic journey, Male covers a lot of ground, but the panoramic nature of this collection becomes its chief attraction. Here are the discoveries of an alert, acute observer as he first published them, full of enthusiasm, scholarship, and personal insight. The author’s expression never falters in this translation; he creates buildings, paintings, and works of art through well-chosen words, and he evokes the landscapes of France, its valleys, hills, and towns, in vividly poetic language.

This book is worthy of its author. The only slips I noticed in an otherwise impeccable edition were in captions to several plates: an inverted listing of the apostles on page 177 and reversed captions on pages 196 and 197. (These mistakes occur in the original French edition of 1968.) The black-and-white illustrations are clear and, like the printed text, appealingly presented.

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RENAISSANCE


Lauro Martines is a historian of the Italian Renaissance who likes English poetry. He writes for two audiences: social historians who ignore the
evidence of Renaissance verse because it seems too subjective or too hard to use, and literary critics who incorporate historical evidence into their footnotes but have not been trained to see the larger picture. He combines the historian’s social analysis and the critic’s literary analysis in the new method he calls “social literary analysis.” After enunciating nine “propositions” behind this method, he offers strategies for moving “from poem to world” and “from world to poem.” Then, after a chapter of reconsiderations, he boldly lists the needs of this new discourse and makes a case “against specialization.” This irenic effort is set forth in deliberately simple language and supported by an impressive knowledge of recent literary scholarship. As a student of literature, I find it refreshing in its scope and its insistence that Renaissance poets were too rhetorically astute to ignore their social roles. But as a teacher of rhetoric, I suspect the book’s strategy will make it less persuasive than it tries to be.

Rhetoricians have long debated whether the refutatio is more effective when placed before or after the main argument or probatio. Martines places his at the end so that the argument does not follow from the problems of specialization but from the propositions for getting beyond it. If these propositions do not hold, the entire method is threatened, and the chapter on “Theory” seems open to debate at several junctures. Martines maintains that a poem bears the marks of the poet’s milieu, or world; that Renaissance poetry derives from the “direct” experience of this world and the “indirect” experience of literature; and that the direct experience is “prior and primary” (1–2). This use of “poem” implies a strictly mimetic theory, where art imitates life. It obviates any noetic theory, where the imagination creates images for society. And it limits the “world” to the social context, ignoring the possibility that poetry, the poem, or even the poet could constitute a world. What we get is Sir Philip Sidney’s “brazen world” of history without his “golden world” of poetry. With this bias toward the social background of literature, Martines quotes few poems and proceeds less “from the poem” than from the critical cliché, thus raising the very prejudice for isolated analysis that he hopes to correct. The problem might be less acute had he written the book backward as a critique of specialization and its discontents, for he demonstrates convincingly that poetic change is not always so simple as critics think (121–23).

Martines never says exactly what he means by Renaissance verse; but clearly he construes the term more broadly than most recruitment committees in the fields known as Renaissance, seventeenth-century, and Restoration poetry, all of which he covers. The new breadth is welcome and is necessary to his project of mapping changes in poetic conventions. Martines shows that social considerations are present not only in the poet’s choice of theme but even more in choices of genre, figure, and diction. Historians must decide whether to study such choices, which belong more to the
“what” of history than to the “why.” Critics, meanwhile, will find many insights into the coteries, patronage, and changing conventions of a rapidly changing age.

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Did an Elizabethan underworld exist, and, if so, what was its nature, what its extent? Who were the Tudor and Stuart vagabonds; what were their reasons for “mummering”? What was the attitude of mainstream society about the problem of rootlessness, and what measures were taken to curb it? Answers to these questions are to be found in this brief, lucidly written volume. Such answers, valuable in themselves, also help to explain why Shakespeare included the swindling chapman Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale* and how the Restoration author Anne Finch could devote a poem, “Fanscomb Barn,” to a sham cripple and his female traveling companion.

Beier’s method is twofold. First, he analyzes arrest records from parishes and relies on what is already established about demographic and economic trends of the period. Second, he gives life to this material by interweaving interpretation drawn from depositions taken by justices of the peace. He concludes that fluctuations in market conditions along with changes in the economic bases of English life created widespread unemployment from the time of Henry VII until the Restoration, the hardest times occurring between 1560 and 1640. “If masterless men have modern counterparts, they are the unemployed of the Great Depression of the 1930s, or the jobless millions of today’s inner cities.” Men, mostly young, wandered looking for work. Women and often children joined them.

No portrait does justice to the variety of people on the road. The Irish fled wars elsewhere. Tinkers and chapmen plied trades which were proscribed without much reason. Pregnant girls, soldiers released from service, and itinerant radical preachers swelled the ranks. Many became professional beggars, aware that begging paid more than day labor. The attempt to regulate such beggars through passports merely bolstered a thriving industry in counterfeit papers. Criminals prowled the highways, both the lowly “footpads” carrying cudgels and the more gentlemanly, mounted “high lawyers.”

Until the birthrate fell off and the demand for labor increased, few of the solutions attempting to stem the tide of tramps had much effect. Summary justice fell into the hands of local authorities, who applied the