

On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards. Douglas Biow.

Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. xii + 312 pp. \$55.

The author continues his project of investigating professionalization in this latest study, three of the six chapters having been largely published already. The book pursues an adapted version of what has come to be regarded as the Burckhardian idea of a distinctly Renaissance individual, exclusively here in relation to men. Though one must ask: when have elite men not asserted themselves as individuals?

Part 1 studies reasons for the self-promotion and success of certain professional men, mainly the courtier Baldassare Castiglione and the goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, who embedded themselves in networks and also plied signature styles. The same unsurprising mix of the general collectivity alongside the conspicuously specific is found in the book's other two parts, one of which studies "mavericks" like the popular medical author Leonardo Fiorvanti and the renowned, innovative mannerist painter Jacopo Tintoretto. The book's final part turns to the rise of beards during the sixteenth century, which, like any fashion, follows social trends while also allowing personal yet public, highly visible self-presentations. Chapter 6, previously published, examines the theatrical function of beards in Giordano Bruno's comedy *Candelaio* of ca. 1582.

Biow ruminates in a lively manner on texts and sometimes refers to images, especially portraits. The book contains fifty-six black-and-white illustrations, many given only passing attention, but all the material is accompanied by crisp presentation and clear, readable prose. Useful, wide-ranging overviews situate the case studies against informed backdrops. Castiglione's presentation of the courtier's specialized knowledge and inimitable expertise develops out of a survey of attitudes toward the mechanical and creative arts from the time of the concept of *techne* in ancient Greece, for instance, which helps us understand the advice manual in the context of trade secrets and professional privilege.

Visual evidence is not always read persuasively. Tintoretto features in chapter 4's study of "visualizing cleanliness" due to his inclusion of two monumental washerwomen at the central midground of his unusual canvas *Jews in the Desert* (1591–92), commissioned for a Benedictine chancel. To claim that iconographic inventiveness

marks artistic individuality is not to say much, however, and it is mistaken to expect every element of a painting (such as laundry hanging in the background of city scenes or a woman washing linens in a stream) to signify symbolically rather than by a variety of other means such as action, immediacy, contemporaneity, and vivacity.

The author has a strange penchant for using the word “mystery” and its variants, like “mysterious” and “mystify,” as though it is an explanatory term, even in the definition of an individual during the Renaissance (ix). The puzzle, as it were, is perhaps explained by the book’s claim that masculinity was typified not only by public performances before women as well as fellow men, but also by inherent character that was manifest in silence, dissimulation, duplicity, and coyness. The latter approaches the belief that to be powerful the phallus must remain unseen, although the author would understandably disavow that stance, if not certain widespread modern assumptions that follow about power. It could be argued that investing men with mystery, whether from a psychoanalytical or historical perspective, reaffirms rather than unpacks patriarchal inequality.

Complexity is richly noted in this judicious study, yet sometimes at the risk of covering all the bases and having it both ways, arriving more at all-encompassing description than elucidatory analysis. More welcome would have been a pointed, detailed examination of another term favored in the book, the *nescio quid* (“I know not what”) or *je ne sais quoi* air characterized here as mysterious, innate, elusive, enigmatic, and ineffable. As is observed, the notion is associated with core Renaissance concepts like *sprezzatura*, a deceptive nonchalance recommended by Castiglione and oft discussed by modern scholars.

Befitting the theme of individuality, the book offers memorable information about singularities such as the way in which barbershops were loci for gossip, what role Fiorvanti played in early plastic surgery (rhinoplasty), or how the myth of Venice included the city’s claim to special purity due to the supposed cleansing function of its canals. Such details ensure that readers grasp the book’s fundamental argument that the personal and the particular matter.

PATRICIA SIMONS, *University of Michigan*