

Richard Strier. *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xii + 304 pp. \$45. ISBN: 978-0-226-77751-1.

This is a big, generous book. It's big because it casts a sharp analytic eye on several Renaissance genres — lyric verse by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Herbert; Shakespearean drama; lay devotional manuals; the essay and discursive prose about the self; Milton's epic and dramatic poems — in representative European languages (English, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish) across four centuries. It's generous because it engages in spirited dialogue with recent critical approaches to these texts — chiefly New Historicism and a new physiocultural humoralism — always appreciating their sound contributions, but forcefully dissenting when they go astray. Strier argues against dark and dour conceptions of the Renaissance, which are based upon a Christian-Stoic-Platonic synthesis of reason, morality, humility, and the control mechanisms that sustained them. To these values he opposes “unrepentant” expressions of self-assertion, perversity, worldly enjoyment, and

self-satisfaction as endorsed by major writers, poets, thinkers, and creative personalities in the period.

Petrarch figures from the outset (along with Erasmus, More, and Luther) as one who disputes Stoic attitudes against passion and replaces them with a toleration for — if not full acceptance of — unruly drives that define what it is to be human. According to Strier, his *Rime sparse* resist rather than embrace the dualism of soul and body. The poet resigns himself to the slant of his will and seems pleased to suffer in consequence of it. Shakespeare's sonnets in turn complicate the speaker's self-loathing and transcend his negative judgment by focusing upon self-canceling commitments and emotions. A masterful reading of sonnet 129 ("The expense of spirit") shows that its self-lacerating intensity derives power from "the existence and importance of pleasure in the process" (95). From this exploration of Renaissance poetry (including observations on Donne and Herbert), Strier proceeds to examine other genres in which passion, worldliness, self-revelation, and personal pride receive similar approbation.

In this respect, Strier sees Shakespeare's drama as expressing a quasi-Nietzschean perspective on the limits of morality as we assess what might be of value. Beginning with a metatheatrical delight that audiences enjoy in the criminality of *Richard III*, Strier proceeds to the cruelty that audiences abhor in 2 *Henry IV* when Hal rejects Falstaff on grounds of prudence, order, and morality. He argues that, in atonement for this high-minded rebuff, Shakespeare went on to dramatize in *King Lear* depths of suffering that make moralization irrelevant, and in *Antony and Cleopatra* a higher wisdom that refutes moralistic claims (though, *pace* the author, I'd propose that Antony's fantasy in 4.14.54–55 of Dido and Aeneas in the afterlife betrays his blindness to their tragedy). Anticipating counterarguments about the conventional morality of *Macbeth*, Strier demonstrates the play's suppression of enjoyment in the murderers' detachment from the world and their rejection of human sociability. Quite the opposite strategy buoys a defense of worldliness in *The Comedy of Errors*, which the author aptly terms "an urban pastoral" (159) as it celebrates a culture of companionate marriage and happily undertaken social obligation.

Shakespeare's validation of this culture in the Protestant context of that play prompts Strier to examine the accommodation of Catholic spirituality to upward social mobility in Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and François de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Neither promotes an ascetic ideal, though the former is haunted by one. Each searches for alternatives to distinctions between laity and clergy and to libertinage in the secular world. For Ignatius, the answer is to sanctify a commitment to one's professional career and the married state; for de Sales, it is to sanctify a range of leisure-class behavior that brought Castiglione's *sprezzatura* into aristocratic living, dining, and party rooms. The sense of self-satisfaction augured here draws Strier to Montaigne and Descartes. Why should each take pride in self-revelations about moral and epistemological weaknesses? For Strier, the answer has to do with a sense of clear conscience and happiness with oneself that both authors project. A similar sense of "proper pride" applies in a heroic way to Milton and to

the successes and failures of his epic protagonists as they attain virtues appropriate to their high station.

My summary of this rich, complex book does little justice to its subtlety and nuance. Its thesis and its chapter-by-chapter analyses will provoke readers to argue, limit, and extend its conclusions, with an expanded awareness of the historical meaning at stake in specific texts. In the clear steady light of its critical argument, we can only welcome this reminder that Renaissance values were not so gloomy as some approaches over the past thirty years have made them appear.

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