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Review Article

History, Art and Literature in Renaissance England

Literature and the Visual Arts in Tudor England. By David Evett. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1990. Pp. xiv, 366. \$35.00.

Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis. By John N. King. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989. Pp. xx, 286. \$37.50.

The sixteenth century is well established as a meeting ground for the historian, the art historian, and the literary critic. For a long time, the Elizabethan period drew the lion's share of scholarly attention, but more recently we have learned to appreciate the complexity and richness of early Tudor culture. Each of the two books reviewed here makes important contributions to the study of Tudor art and literature which will be of interest to historians as well.

John N. King is a respected literary scholar whose work has long earned him praise from historians as well as literary scholars. His earlier book on *English Reformation Literature*, which focused on the writings of the mid-century polemical poet Robert Crowley, brought to light a whole range of previously neglected mid Tudor poetry and prose, at precisely the same time that political historians were coming to the conclusion that the reigns of Edward VI (1547-53) and Mary I (1553-58)

were not the total disaster that they had been once thought. In *Tudor Royal Iconography*, King has set himself a more ambitious and difficult task: to trace the development of royal imagery in the context of the religious to-ings and fro-ings of the sixteenth century. Building on the classic, but now rather dated, picture of Tudor imperial iconography presented thirty years ago by the late Dame Frances Yates, and on more recent work by Sir Roy Strong, King presents a sensitive and highly nuanced account of the *imago regis* and its various transformations, beginning with Henry VII's manipulation of the image of the "saintly" King Henry VI,¹ the last rightful Lancastrian king, and then continuing with Henry VIII's half-hearted caesaropapist reformation, through the reign of his protestant son and successor, the "new Josiah," Edward, and the return of England to the Catholic fold under Mary. Elizabeth, long the centre of iconographic studies, is demoted almost to an afterthought, her cult building on the tradition developed by her predecessors, even including her Catholic older sister. One of the book's many strengths is its own "catholicity" of matter; rather than concentrate on certain peaks in Tudor art and literature, King continues to do what he does very well, namely excavate a variety of images crude and subtle from different media. He makes especially good use of that most aesthetically underrated (and widely-circulating) of Tudor visual art forms, the woodcut, and Princeton has spared little expense in producing, within a relatively short volume, close to one hundred black and white illustrations.

As in David Evelt's book, the principal of "order," the reduction of experience to some sort of method, serves to a degree as an organizing factor. Order is bestowed on many of the pictures by a series of conflicting and complementary notions, from which King draws several of his chapter headings: the sword and the book (referring to Henry VIII's and later Edward VI's, representation of themselves as both potent and learned, the scholarly prince defeating the Romish monster while, Moses-like, releasing the printed word of God to his people); the conflict of imperial crown and popish tiara, partly an attempt to turn the vocabulary of medieval imperial challenges to papal supremacy to a new purpose; and, most interesting, the image of the godly queens, female monarchs in a male society bringing godliness to their subjects, each in her own fashion. Mary's regime did not neglect the use of images to put forward the image of her as pious Christian monarch, God's handmaid,

beating down the monster of heresy and returning her lost sheep to the Roman fold; their images and the propaganda were counteracted by exiled protestants, for whom the biblical queen Jezebel offered a suitable paradigm for attacking the Marian regime. At Mary's death in 1558, "royalist iconography underwent its second reversal in seven years" (221), Mary's motto *veritas temporis filia* being adapted into Elizabeth's *semper eadem*; Elizabeth almost immediately proclaimed her protestantism publicly with a return to the book imagery of her father and brother.²

King is a very careful scholar who analyzes his evidence without pushing it too far; his bibliography refers to most of the relevant historical literature of the past twenty years, and his book is both well-written and persuasive. Occasionally, King is a little too broad with generalizations: his suggestion (17) that royal iconography "filled the vacuum left by iconoclastic attacks" on images of the Virgin and of saints is an interesting one, but it does not take account of the fact that a great number of pre-reformation church windows featured royal representations, not all of them strictly armorial; nor does it note the more general suspicion of *any* sort of image, whether manifestly Catholic or merely decorative, as potentially leading to superstition: this has been more correctly termed "iconophobia," and it developed along with but independently of more radical and sporadic iconoclasm.³ And sometimes even King cannot avoid a sudden and disconcerting glance ahead from his earlier or mid Tudor material to the late Elizabethan and Jacobean period, especially to Shakespeare (52); some of these leaps are suggestive, but others seem out of place, almost digressions. These are, however, minor flaws in a well-crafted and beautifully-produced book on an interesting and important subject.

David Evett's task is if anything even more daunting: to explore the interrelationships between art, architecture and literature in the "long" sixteenth century (up to and including the Jacobean period—though Evett in fact sees a break in styles of sorts occurring in 1603). This is a task which has been tried, with mixed success, before; perhaps most famously by Wylie Sypher in *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*.⁴ The architecture of Evett's argument is built on a recurring distinction between the principals of *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*: tacking different things together into a composite whole without granting any special priority to one or the other, versus the ranking of the elements in a composition hierarchically, with some subordinated to others. Both these principles can be found at

work in Tudor literature and in Tudor art and architecture; the paratactical style can be found in early Tudor "planar" architecture and the stress on surfaces in visual representation (something once noted of the Burgundian renaissance by Johan Huizinga); the hypotactical can be found best in the imported Renaissance style (beginning with Alberti and continuing with Palladio and other admirers of Vitruvius) of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The one is largely medieval, the other Renaissance.

Evelt's is a brave attempt but not an altogether successful one. Some of his analogies between building and writing seem rather contrived, or even forced. At times, his account is weighed down by a burdensome taxonomy, including distinctions between Renaissance (the style) and Renascence (the period), and between Demotic and Grotesque modes within the earlier Tudor style. Most of these labels support perfectly sensible and subtle distinctions, but they come rather too thickly and frequently, and at times seem to be mere replacement pigeon holes for older and inadequate labels (like Sypher's linear succession of renaissance/mannerist/baroque/late baroque) which Evelt is attempting to replace. To Evelt's credit, he repudiates such sillinesses as the statement that *The Merchant of Venice* has a diagonal rather than horizontal or vertical construction, and is therefore Baroque, and avoids making similar claims. His introduction is a useful and clearheaded statement of the methodological problems involved in the kind of *Geistesgeschichte* which goes back to Burckhardt and has now become extremely difficult to do, given the massive secondary bibliographies in every field.

There are some peculiar, and ahistorical, statements. Evelt's attempt to link his stylistic changes not only between media but also to social change lead him astray, as he refers repeatedly to the Elizabethan "middle class" and "bourgeoisie" (shades of Louis B. Wright).⁵ To speak of Tudor hospitality and the structure of great houses (70) without reference to the work of Felicity Heal (not of course her book on *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, which appeared simultaneous with Evelt's, but her important article of several years ago in *Past and Present*) seems rather brave. Like King's book, Evelt's has been lavishly illustrated with fifty-six black and white plates showing everything from a staircase at Hatfield House to an anonymous plaster chimney piece. Unlike King's, most of these illustrations are relatively well-known, and some of them appear to be here for decoration rather than as the focus of discussion—Evelt has engaged, perhaps, in a little parataxis of his own. But on the whole this

is a rich and valuable study, which will arouse discussion and criticism but will also furnish a basis for future interdisciplinary exercises of its kind. Like King's book, Evett's has much to offer scholars in a variety of fields.

NOTES

1. See works by McKenna and Theilmann.
2. Haigh, *The Reign of Elizabeth I* contains a set of articles on various aspects of Elizabeth's reign, including religion, that collectively offer a more reliable picture than the several popular biographies that have recently appeared; for an overview of the artistic and cultural context, with historical background, see Palliser 365-76.
3. See works by Aston, Collinson and Walt.
4. This classic but contentious work should be read in conjunction with such well-known art-historical studies as Gombrich's *Norm and Form* and Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*.
5. Wright's book offers a goldmine of information on Elizabethan London, though its purported identification of a bourgeois class with a distinctive culture has not fared well with changing historiographic fashion. On the other hand, some very recent literary critics appear more disposed to situate such writers as Shakespeare (both the dramatist himself and contemporary performances of his plays) within a tradition which embraces popular as well as court and aristocratic/gentry elements: see, for example, Bristol and Patterson.

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