

H-Net Reviews

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Peter Elmer, ed. *Challenges to Authority. The Renaissance in Europe, A Cultural Enquiry.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xv + 418 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08220-3.

Peter Elmer, Nick Webb, Roberta Wood, eds. *The Renaissance in Europe: An Anthology.* New Haven, and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xii + 412 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08222-7.

Lucille Kekewich, ed. *The Impact of Humanism.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xii + 273 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08221-0.

David Mateer, ed. *Courts, Patrons and Poets. The Renaissance in Europe: A Cultural Enquiry.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xi + 383 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08225-8.

Keith Whitlock, ed. *The Renaissance in Europe: A Reader.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. ix + 374 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08223-4.

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Renaissance Culture: Up Close from a Distance

Renaissance Culture: Up Close from a Distance

The Open University's new course, "The Renaissance in Europe: A Cultural Enquiry," introduces undergraduates to the latest research on the cultural history of the Renaissance and Reformation and to the methods of cultural history. In both these tasks it succeeds admirably. The textbooks and supplementary readings provide a nuanced approach to contemporary research areas and problems in Renaissance culture. As the backbone of a distance-learning course, the textbooks combine straightforward expository passages—the equivalent of lectures—with exercises that ask students to read selected primary and secondary sources and answer specific questions about them, questions that are then discussed in the textbook. The complete package of five

books is an up-to-date course that could be used on its own (with the eight additional set texts and several recordings of Renaissance music) by an ambitious and disciplined student, or mined by teachers of Renaissance studies for ideas and exercises to use in their own courses.

Given the range and purpose of the material in the five books under review, I have divided this review into three parts. The first provides a synopsis of the textbook topics and a brief overview of the supplementary volumes. The second gives a more detailed synopsis of one chapter, in order to convey some sense of how the books are intended to be used. The final part concludes with some reflections on the limitations of the set and how one might use it in a traditional college or university course on the Renaissance.

The first textbook, *The Impact of Humanism*, provides an introduction to the course as a whole as well as to humanism in particular. The first chapter, by Peter Elmer, presents Jacob Burckhardt's interpretation of the Renaissance as a critical framework for the course. In the second chapter, Lucille Kekewich, Nick Webb, and Antony Lentin introduce some of the analytic techniques of modern cultural history by examining the meanings of typefaces, forks, pyrotechnics, and portraits. The remaining four chapters are devoted to humanism. Kekewich introduces humanism, focusing on early antiquarians, textual critics, women humanists, and humanist historians. Fiona Richards discusses music and humanism, including the development of music printing. Susan Khin Zaw and Kekewich examine how humanists approached ancient moral philosophy. In the last chapter, Kekewich contextualizes Machiavelli's *Prince*.

The second textbook, *Courts, Patrons and Poets*, shifts the focus more explicitly to the context of cultural production in the Renaissance. In the first chapter, Elmer provides an overview of Italian court culture and then examines its reception at the court of Matthias Corvinus of Hungary. Two Italian courts are the focus of the second and third chapters. Georgia Clarke, David Mateer, Elmer, and Nick Webb examine artists at the court of the Sforza in Milan, emphasizing architecture, music, and Leonardo da Vinci's multifaceted activity. Anabel Thomas, in contrast, turns to fifteenth-century Florence, treating Medici cultural patronage in terms of court culture. The fourth and fifth chapters address the reception, and transformation, of Italian court culture in Britain. Ceri Sullivan examines the poetic Renaissance in Britain, while Richard Danson Brown discusses the London stage in its social and historical contexts through a close reading of "The Merchant of Venice."

If the first two volumes move back and forth between the fifteenth and sixteenth century, addressing subjects traditionally framed as part of the Renaissance, the third textbook, *Challenges to Authority*, begins in the sixteenth century and points toward the seventeenth. Three chapters examine the Reformation—chiefly the Protestant reformations. Anne Laurence treats the connection between Renaissance and Reformation in the first chapter and the spread of reform in the second. In the third, Laurence, Mateer, and Webb examine the representation of reform, focusing on ritual, iconoclasm, portraiture, and music. The fourth chapter, by Keith Whitlock, is a close reading of the picaresque tale *Lazarillo de Tormes*, examining it as humanist parody, social commentary, and anticlerical satire. In the fifth chapter, Elmer asks whether

science had a Renaissance, drawing on recent social history of science for his answer. The sixth chapter, also by Elmer, turns to the "dark side," the occult sciences and witchcraft. This chapter provides the background for the seventh chapter, Brown's examination of *The Witch of Edmonton*, a tragicomic play about witchcraft. Lentin rounds out the volume, and the course, with a chapter on "Montaigne on Montaigne."

All three textbooks include extensive illustrations that are an integral part of the course. Each chapter ends with a selected bibliography of books and articles in English. As is evident from the summaries above, this course is truly a collaborative effort by the Open University faculty and staff. The Anthology of primary sources and Reader of secondary sources are designed to be used in the course exercises. The Anthology contains ninety-one excerpts of sources, ranging from humanist letters and treatises to letters patent, banquet menus, and the Eton school syllabus. The Reader's thirty-four selections include a few commissioned for the volume, but most are abridgements or excerpts of scholarly articles or books on the course subjects. Each item in the Anthology and Reader is carefully integrated into the course plan, though the volumes could be used on their own.

The method used in this course can best be understood by an example. I have chosen chapter five of *The Impact of Humanism*, by Susan Khin Zaw and Lucille Kekewich, which examines "The Humanists and Ancient Philosophy." The chapter opens with a brief statement of objectives: students should be able to identify the schools and principal doctrines of ancient ethics, define the focus of Renaissance ethics, explain the specific contributions of four selected texts, and "assess the validity of Burckhardt's view of Renaissance philosophy" (147). The authors chose as their four texts Lorenzo Valla's *Of the True and the False Good*, Castiglione's *Courtier*, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, and More's *Utopia*. The first part of the chapter explains the basic ethical principles of Platonism, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. The first exercise in the chapter comes in the section on Platonism: after reading three paragraphs on Plato's ethical principles, students are asked to read an excerpt from the *Phaedrus* in the course Anthology; they then see whether they can recognize the ethical principles that were stated in the text and assess whether Plato's mythological presentation makes the principles more or less convincing. A short "discussion" after the exercises identifies the way that Plato's myth of the charioteer and his two horses expresses ethical principles and suggests how the mythological form might make the idea

more compelling to some readers.

The next four pages introduce the difference between modern interpretations of ancient ethics and humanists' readings, suggesting to students that the humanists' focus on edification led them to "misread" (by modern lights) the ancients; as a consequence, cultural historians need to examine Renaissance ethics without modern preconceptions of what the ancients were "really" saying. With this caveat in mind, the authors turn to the texts themselves. Each section includes an outline of the relevant parts of the text and at least one exercise based on material in the Anthology. For example, the section on *The Praise of Folly* asks students to read an excerpt and then answer the following questions: "What kind of theologians does Erasmus have Folly condemn, and on what grounds does she criticize them?" (178). Zaw and Kekewich do not neglect the ambiguity of the texts—*Utopia* in particular—and they ask pointed questions about how to interpret arguments that are expressed in dialogic form.

The final section turns to a critical reading of Burckhardt on humanist ethics. The authors note that the visual arts and literature were central to Burckhardt's vision of the Renaissance, which he saw as "not primarily a historical but rather a spiritual and cultural phenomenon" (186). They suggest that Burckhardt granted little importance to humanist moral philosophy in large part because he saw it as commonplace; he did not appreciate that humanist moralists' chief innovation was in form—in particular, restoring the dialogue and its rhetorical conventions to moral discourse—not in content. After finishing this chapter, students should be able to appreciate the limits, as well as the achievements, of Burckhardt's account of the Renaissance of letters.

Other chapters contain a similar blend of information and interpretation with exercises that refine students' ability to analyze primary and secondary sources and synthesize what they have learned. The textbook chapters are carefully designed so that a reasonably intelligent reader with no previous background in the Renaissance or cultural history can make sense of them. Key terms, indicated in boldface, are defined in the chapter text and in a glossary at the end of each volume.

The Renaissance that emerges from these volumes is complex and fragmented. Instead of providing a contemporary, synthetic interpretation of the Renaissance as a cultural movement, this book starts with the foundational modern synthesis, Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and systematically deconstructs

it. I entirely approve of this approach. A successful university course on a subject as rich as Renaissance culture should provide a complicated view, one that will leave students in a position to assess critically the syntheses that every scholarly generation produces (e.g. Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries*, 1998). If there is an underlying message in these books, it is that cultural production is intimately linked to the social circumstances in which culture is produced and consumed; even here, however, the authors reject the crude determinism that sometimes afflicts such analyses. Instructors might find that they disagree with some particular aspects of the course; for instance, I think that the chapter on science gives short shrift to the intellectual concerns of Renaissance anatomists and astronomers. But unless they reject the last two decades of scholarship out of hand, instructors should find the course as a whole to be rigorous and comprehensive for an introductory survey.

The course does have certain limitations in its scope and focus. Though the first two volumes address the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while the third concentrates on the sixteenth and early seventeenth, each volume is arranged thematically. Students without any previous European history would need a chronological framework to make sense of some of the references to people and events; they would also benefit from at least a skeleton overview of the social and political structure of the period.

As one expects in a course on the Renaissance, the course focuses heavily on Italy. I was initially surprised by the prominence of England in the course. This focus is both explicit and implicit; two chapters center on English dramas, while the discussion of *Lazarillo de Tormes* is based on a modernized version of a contemporary English translation of the work, and the exercises draw attention to occasional differences between the Spanish original and the Renaissance English translation. The course draws on the discipline of English literary criticism, and it was designed in the UK; both of these facts clearly account for England's prominence. Instructors whose courses focus on the continental Renaissance might find the English material less relevant, but the English material does allow students to engage with untranslated primary sources and to see how Renaissance culture was transformed in the course of its reception outside of Italy. Both *The Prince* and Montaigne's essays receive extended treatment, so the English focus, while striking, does not seem excessive.

It is, of course, not wholly accurate to claim that these books and the associated set texts and recordings constitute a complete course. The Open University course also involves televised or videotaped lectures and, crucially, written exercises that are graded by the university's tutors. Students in the UK, other EU countries, and a few additional states can take this and other Open University courses for credit toward a diploma or BA degree.

Nonetheless, it might be tempting to arrange a regular course around these three textbooks and the associated material. Those of us who teach at universities or colleges on a semester or trimester calendar, however, will immediately run up against a problem. The Open University course lasts eight months. Taken together, the textbooks, anthology, and reader comprise over 1,800 pages; the additional set books, if they are read in their entirety, more than double that figure. Few university instructors could demand that their undergraduates read and master that amount of material, drawn from several disciplines, in one term. One could use the first two volumes in a one-semester or two-trimester course on Renaissance culture; the third volume might work well in a one-term course on the Reformation era, but since the third volume presumes that students have mastered the first two, the instructor would need to provide some additional background. Instructors who wanted to use the entire set of course materials would best be advised to stretch the course out over two terms, if that is possible.

Despite being deeply impressed by the quality and scope of these course materials, I am still uncertain whether I will adopt any of them for my own courses. The course staff at the Open University has clearly put much more time and money into preparing this course than most of us can do except over a period of years. One could teach a great course on the basis of these materials. Whose course would it be, though? Teaching a course around these books raises the question of what role a university or college teacher should play. Is it to come up with a personal interpretation of what he or she studies and present it to the students, or simply to facilitate students' learning? These are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but using someone else's course puts the instructor more firmly in the latter camp.

The result could be exciting for students. If they read the textbook and supporting material carefully, they would come to the classroom prepared to engage in serious conversations about the most difficult aspects of the cultural history of the Renaissance. Classroom time could also be used for individual and group projects, which are usually pursued outside of class with little guidance from the teacher. Many students would learn far more from such an approach than from the traditional lecture-discussion course, where the relationship between primary and secondary source readings has to be teased out laboriously in the classroom.

Regardless of how one chooses to use them, these books are excellent resources for anyone who has to teach the cultural history of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. An old teacher's commonplace is that if there are two books on a subject, you should assign the worse book to the students and use the better one for your lectures. As guides to teaching the Renaissance, these books are very good indeed. Scholars of the field will probably not learn anything new from them, but unless they have thought long and hard about how to teach the Renaissance, they should come away from these books with fresh approaches to bring to the classroom.

Appendix: The Other Set Books for the Course

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

Alison Cole, *Art of the Italian Renaissance Courts: Virtue and Magnificence*.

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*.

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. J. L. Halio.

D. Norbrook, *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen.

W. Rowley, T. Dekker, and J. Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. P. Corbin and D. Sedge.

The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes, ed. Keith Whitlock, trans. D. Rowland.

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