

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58758-7 - The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1500-1600

Edited by Arthur F. Kinney

Excerpt

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Introduction

A currently recognized representation of the Tudor aesthetic in the sixteenth century is Hans Holbein's double portrait of "The Ambassadors" painted in the spring of 1533 in London (Figure 1), yet its significance and its actual meaning have been debated. For Stephen Greenblatt, the painting represents a cultural poetics that is essentially humanistic. The work is seen from the perspective of the courtly and social and it emphasizes the vast and varied knowledge humanism had come to represent at the Henrician court:

Jean de Dinteville, seigneur de Polisy and Francis I's ambassador to the English court, and his friend Georges de Selve, shortly to be bishop of Lavaur, stand at either side of a two-shelved table. They are young, successful men, whose impressively wide-ranging interests and accomplishments are elegantly recorded by the objects scattered with careful casualness on the table: celestial and terrestrial globes, sundials, quadrants and other instruments of astronomy and geometry, a lute, a case of flutes, a German book of arithmetic, kept open by a square, and an open German hymn book, on whose pages may be seen part of Luther's translation of the "Veni Creator Spiritus" and his "Shortened Version of the Ten Commandments" ... The terrestrial and celestial spheres, the sword and the book, the state and the church, Protestantism and Catholicism, the mind as measurer of all things and the mind as unifying force, the arts and sciences, the power of images and the power of words – all are conjoined then in Holbein's painting and integrated in a design as intricate as the pavement ...¹

on which the two men stand. Greenblatt's verbal portrait is meant to match Holbein's painterly one, persuading us to accept a humanist poetics of cultural accomplishment that leads to optimism and even complacency. It is a poetics that joins Platonic epistemology of Idea to Aristotelian mimesis of authentic representation, just as the literary works of Erasmus and Thomas More were doing at the time. Greenblatt continues, "And yet slashing across the pavement, intruding upon these complex harmonies and disrupting

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1 *The Ambassadors*, by Hans Holbein.

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them, is the extraordinary anamorphic representation of the death's-head. Viewed frontally, the skull is an unreadable blur in the center foreground of the painting; only from the proper position at the side of the painting is it suddenly revealed" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 18).

Practicing a twentieth-century formalism to read a work of art, Greenblatt looks, much as the sixteenth-century grammar school student would, at the work's harmony, integration, and meaning. Noting what is out of place, the grim reminder of death, Greenblatt moves on to the kind of dialectic that advanced humanist training fostered, implying that truth lies finally either in paradox of the kind that lies behind the *Utopia*, Petrarchan lyric, and much public drama, or an ongoing interrogation, in which meaning is finally indeterminate, as in George Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F. J.*, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, or Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Either way, as proposition or dialectic, statement or argument, Holbein's double portrait is essentially a work of humanist poetics coincident with the teaching of Tudor grammar schools and fundamental to courtly aesthetic.

Lisa Jardine, however, observing that the painting was executed by a foreign artist with strong mercantile interests, and that it did not remain in England long, sees a work far more troubling.

Holbein's "The Ambassadors" was painted (for Jean de Dinteville) in London in the spring of 1533 (the painting left England when François I's ambassador returned to France late in 1553, and was hung in de Dinteville's chateau at Polisy). The artist, Hans Holbein, was a German from Basle, most of whose commissions in London had been portraits of German merchants resident in the city. The setting for this painting (identified by the pavement on which the two men stand) is the chapel in Westminster Cathedral in which Henry VIII's new queen, Anne Boleyn (whom he had secretly married at the end of January, 1533), was crowned with great pomp and ceremony at the end of May. This was an acutely fraught period of English diplomatic activity (Anne was pregnant and Henry VIII would not risk the "boy's" being born a bastard by delaying her recognition as his legitimate wife; François I was meanwhile trying to persuade him not to go public until he had smoothed the path of divorce and remarriage with the Medici Pope, Clement VII). Jean de Dinteville's brother, Francois, Bishop of Auxerre, was François I's ambassador to Rome. A week before the coronation Jean de Dinteville wrote to his brother (in a letter whose evasive phrasing clearly shows he expected it to be vetted) with a veiled warning that it might be necessary for him to intervene with the Pope since things in London were coming to a head.²

For Jardine, then, the painting is not an emblem of the humanist movement and its wide cultural aesthetic constrained by mortality, but the consequence

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of particular historic forces joining at a particular historic moment: not only the painter and subject are important but the precise time the work was executed and a particular use to which it might be put. Armed with historic specificity, she is alerted to other features in what is perhaps history's first double portrait:

Some of the issues foremost in the French envoy's mind at the time are elegantly and precisely figured in the conjunctions of objects painted on the lower (mundane) shelf on which he leans. The foreshortened uncased lute (its discarded case lies under the table on de Dinteville's side) with its prominently broken string is still recognizably an emblem of current discord. Beneath its neck lies an open hymn-book, in which we can still read the opening verse in German of Luther's "Kom Heiliger Geyst" ["Come Holy Ghost"] on the left, and "Mensch wiltu leben seliglich" ["Man wilt thou live blessedly"] (with the music of tenor voice); the discord here specified, then, is that within the Christian Church, a discord within which Henry's impending marriage to a known sympathizer with the Reformation movement played a significant part. The collection of harmonizing flutes under the hymn-book remain out of use, in their case. ("Strains of Renaissance Reading," p. 298)

Moreover, the polyhedral sundial and quadrant are misdirected and reversed, so that they cannot perform their measurements accurately; the skull at the center of the base of the portrait forms a direct diagonal line with another emblem of death (and life) in the crucifix of Christ showing behind the drapery at the top left of the painting. The book of mathematics is open at the start of a section on Division. Such a sense of the cultural moment does not permit integration for Jardine, but quite the opposite: "Holbein's meticulously rendered globe [set at Polisy] represents discord as violent and as destructive of international peace as doctrinal difference within the Christian Church" (p. 299). The imperialistic need and the failure of a negotiated empire is the explicit message encoded in the work: "for Holbein and his sitters Empire is indeed a key issue, but that it already figures in the painting as the *problem* around whose absent presence the entire composition is structured. In other words, far from being itself imperialistic, it struggles with imperialism elsewhere" (p. 302).

For all their apparent difference, however – in their approaches, their concerns, their observations, and their conclusions – Greenblatt and Jardine are more alike than not in their diverse interpretations of Holbein's work. Both attempt to narratize a picture, to transfer paint into words and to make sense of the painting by showing how it tells a story. For Greenblatt, it is a story of human accomplishment; for Jardine, it is a story of breakdown and anxiety. In their desire to account for each element in this crowded painting of details, Greenblatt and Jardine attempt to order

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their reactions controlled by their own aesthetic, one that makes sense of the details. They are both practicing what readers of the Tudor period practiced – receiving texts by intervening in them to establish meaning. It is this understanding, as the various authors of the following chapters demonstrate in various ways, that governed both the conception and reception of public and private writing. This Tudor aesthetic, at first enunciated by Renaissance painters in Italy, rested centrally on two principles. First, works were seen as pluralistic (not simply anamorphic), quite unlike the monolithic mathematical perspective that characterizes much modern thought. In other words, the painters and writers of the Renaissance with whom we are concerned placed a premium on the potential multiplicity of perspective. Painters did not expect viewers to remain fixed in looking at a work of art, but to move around to various positions to view it, just as the writers at Henry's court expected to be read: More's *Utopia*, for instance, is about a land and a people seen, simultaneously, by Hythlodæus, Peter Giles, the More-persona, More the author, and the reader (who might attempt to consolidate some or all of these views). Shifting stances allow various readings; Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, to take another example, can be read as an epic, an allegory, a romance, an heroic narrative, or an elaborate plea for patronage. Not all perspectives can be held simultaneously: to see the death's head in "The Ambassadors" prevents the viewer from seeing the two human figures; concentrating on the objects on the table and their meanings takes the viewer away from the ambassadors, while they in turn may be viewed individually or in conjunction with one other (one is more formal and yet more modest than the other). As James Elkins remarks, "Instead of simple, rational, symmetrical pictures of perspective 'hollow-space,' we find a number of complicated practices."³ Thus conditioned, readers of a work of dialectic such as Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* would not be frustrated as the subject of folly shifts in matter and attitude, but instead derive pleasure from such a work. They would also be prepared for the segmentation of acts and scenes in a play like *The Spanish Tragedy* when in the theatre as well as for the cross-cutting of scenes in the *Arcadia* when at home.

A second aesthetic principle of Tudor culture (and Tudor writing) is what Elkins calls "the object-oriented purpose of much Renaissance picture making: the idea that the artists' attentions, and their perspective methods, were focused on the delineation of particular objects rather than the erection of a scaffolding of fictive space" (*The Poetics of Perspective*, p. 56). The interest Tudors had in their material existence is illustrated throughout their writing, as in the material object of gold chamber pots in

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Utopia or the material practice of hawking in Skelton's poetic attack on his curate at Diss, the tournaments in Sidney and Nashe, the Wood of Error in Spenser. But like the painters this emphasis on the concrete rather than the abstract provided means more often than ends. "Drawings of objects set against indeterminate or empty backgrounds, as was the practice, appear ready to be inserted in paintings whenever a painter might want," Elkins writes (*The Poetics of Perspective*, p. 59). Rather than appreciate what we have termed singular or essential paradigms of unchanging truth, the Tudors, especially after the Reformation, relished and recorded the plenitude of life, combining their reason and passion to make provisional approximations of the world teeming with change all about them. Similar to the royal palace of Whitehall that came to dominate London in this period – seen variously as "the largest and ugliest palace in Europe" and "a heap of houses"⁴ – Tudor aesthetics always admitted both a single central palace of the King that was itself once the house of archbishops, and the separate entities that surrounded it, including the Queen's chambers, the old state rooms occupied by Wolsey, gardens, parks, and gates. A palace built from necessity and desire as well as pleasure, it argued more for plenitude than integration.

The literary and cultural texts examined in this volume, then, reflecting this Tudor aesthetic, were neither passive receptacles of the culture nor outside the cultural history in which they played out their ideas. Rather, they were productions of a Renaissance culture whose works were conditioned by the social, political, and religious forces with which they participated, which they reflected, and to which they in turn contributed. A written text was not a work suddenly and wholly inspired by a muse of poesy but rather was a work constructed from various if discordant perceptions of various cultural forces and practices. Indeed, the forces which distinguished a text were often but not always congruent with the various practices of a poetics inherited from classical works. Thus even the most literary of works was created through a process of "discovering," imitating and diverging from a classical model and so mapping something new. Contending multiple narratives could therefore address the same issue – such as the perfect courtier, heroic action, or the prerequisites to salvation – and could appear in various forms – such as folios, quartos, or manuscripts – intended for different and sometimes discrete audiences. While the common property of all such texts was language, various lexicons – such as the vocabulary of the court, the talk of the street, and the specialized cant of the underworld – and various linguistic formations – such as the variety of short lyrics lumped together as "sonnets" or "songs" – promoted the cultural principles of pluralism and plenitude. Richard Helgerson has

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shown how this happened in connection with the murder in 1551 of Thomas Arden, a gentleman of Faversham, Kent, by his wife, her lover, and a number of accomplices. Here different perspectives also took different forms. “For more than half a century – from its first brief mention in the *Breviat Chronicle* of 1551 through the long and detailed account in Holinshed to the retellings in Stow and Heywood – Arden’s murder was very much part of England’s history,” he tells us. “But then . . . it left history (or was forcibly ejected from it) to reappear in a succession of genres well off the main line of English historical writing – stage play, ballad, collection of wonders, calendars of crime, antiquarian treatise, puppet show, ballet, novel, and opera.”⁵ Different genres, themselves often elastic, admitted or even encouraged different concerns and attitudes different readers might have on different occasions. Together they inscribe a cultural moment and separately help to constitute the literature of Tudor England.

Plenitude which invited multiple perspective characterized the age from its start. In *De ratione studii*, written with John Colet as a plan of study for St. Paul’s School, London, and published in 1511, Erasmus insisted a teacher should not be “content with the standard ten or twelve authors, but would require a veritable universe of learning (*sed orbem illum doctrinae requiram*).” His *De Copia* was written at about the same time to show endless ways of varying words to make a single statement or promote a single idea. The consequence was, as Lauro Martines notes, that “humanism in itself had no strict or narrow political ideology . . . it spoke up for princely rule or for republican government; and it could plump for absolute power under kingship, or instead, favor republican states based upon an educated urban nobility and *haute bourgeoisie*.”⁶ At once classical and contemporary, international and national, humanist pedagogy, says James Tracy, functioned as “an optical glass for seeing the world, whose uses were as diverse as the intentions of those who thought and wrote within its framework.”⁷ Indeed, by 1586 William Webbe was complaining of “innumerable sorts of English Bookes, and infinite fardles of printed pamphlets, wherewith this Country is pestered, all shopps stuffed, and every study furnished.”⁸ Yet James Cleland delights in such variety and number. Cleland comments in *The Institution of a Young Noble Man* (1607) that “learning is circular, and the Muses stand round about Apollo, having no beginning nor ending more than a geometrical circle, so that he who would enjoy one of the disciplines must labour to be acquainted with them all.” For Roger Ascham in *The Scholemaster* (1570), books could even replace experience. He posited his famous judgment that, to escape the dangerous state of Italy, it was better for students of the world to read

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about that country than to take the fashionable Grand Tour. (Philip Sidney apparently believed in both, writing letters to his brother Robert about his European travels so that Robert would not have to go himself, but if he did, telling him what to watch out for.)

Just so: written works not only reflected a dispersed culture but could intervene and help to direct it. Such a conjunction is seen with special clarity during the brief reign of Edward VI when political and social order were often connected to orderly speech and measured by it. At such an interstice, the word *quiet*, for instance, was more than descriptive; it was also prescriptive. The proclamation of Edward's government issued in 1551 against political and religious rumors that were seen as subversive asks each man to "apply himself to live obediently, quietly, without murmur, grudging, sowing of sedition, spreading of tales or rumors, and without doing or saying of any manner of thing (as near God will give them grace) that may touch the dignity of his majesty, his council, his magistrates or ministers." Conversely, irresponsible speech could cause social unrest. A number of governmental documents argue a close connection between disorderly language, unlawful gatherings, and rebellion. The state-authored "Homilie agaynst Contencion and Braulynge" (1547), paraphrasing Paul's epistles to Timothy, claims that "foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they breed strife" endanger the church and, employing the literary form of sermon and the literary practice of biblical exegesis, points to contemporary instances in "gospeler," "papist," and "heretic."

Such writing examines the ideas of the state or the church following the literary techniques introduced into Tudor classrooms by Tudor rhetorics. Through these books and repeated lessons and drills, Henrician humanists promoted a rhetorical culture whereby counselors to the prince were those most educated and eloquent. Similar training was given both lawyers and preachers. Their advice and methods would direct, but not integrate, the works of state and church as well as writings for leisure and reflection. Later Elizabethan writers continued such practices. John Lyly's *Euphues* was designed to give the court a new, elevated, and delightfully varied if schematic language; *The Faerie Queene* was written, according to Spenser, to fashion a gentleman by modeling multiple forms of behavior embodying thoughts and acts of virtue; and even Sidney's *Arcadia*, circulated privately in manuscript, attempted to define the ideal citizen through the conflicting formulations of his characters. Such works were constructed through anthologies of incidents that made them pluralistic in narrative viewpoint and plentiful in character and incident.

Furthermore, the horizons of expectations for cultural texts steadily expanded throughout the sixteenth century. In 1540 Thomas Cranmer

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notes in his preface to the second edition of the Great Bible that it is intended for “all manner of persons, men, women, young, old, learned, unlearned, rich, poor, priests, laymen, Lords, Ladies, officers, tenants, and mean men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants, artificers, husbandmen, and all manner of persons of what estate or condition soever they be” concluding that it is “sufficiently determined and approved, that it is convenient and good, the scripture to be read of all sorts & kinds of people, and in the vulgar tongue.” In the event, he was ahead of his time; both Henry (in a proclamation of 1541) and Mary resisted such circulation. But the “golden age” of Elizabeth I may have been most golden in its profusion of bibles and other works – the works that Webbe abhorred; in the aggregate, such works preserve a thick description of the Elizabethan culture. Reading thus demanded even more active and deeper engagement. But Richard Hooker found readers had the capacity needed: “the mind, while we are in this present life whether it contemplate, meditate, deliberate, or howsoever exercise itself, worketh nothing without continual recourse unto imagination the only storehouse of wit end peculiar chair of memory.” In a world of swift cultural change, disparate audiences, and indeterminate meanings, each reader had for Hooker, writing in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593), the ability to reflect on what he or she reads, finding there exemplary and pleasurable mirrors of the self. Hooker’s interests were chiefly religion and philosophy, but Sidney’s poetics for the artist is not altogether dissimilar. Sidney’s poet is “lifted up with the vigour of his own inventions, [and] doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature.” He mixes Platonic ideals with an Aristotelian mimesis in order to convey, through metaphor and even unities of action, time, and place, how the poetic world is analogous to an intricate natural one by means of varying perspectives. The golden world of the poet – if it is to reach the multitude of the poet’s readers – must abstract like the philosopher but cannot do so without “pleasaunt riuers, fruitfull trees, sweete-smelling flowers”:⁹ the quotidian world of nature, the messiness of history. But then, through such a process, Sidney’s poet also produces works for the Tudor century distinctive in the pluralism and plenitude they harbor. Such writing opens things up rather than closes them down, forever inviting readers to join in the production of meaning. Perhaps this is the key to why such a body of English writing has been called “the Renaissance” – and why it is so alive, so varied, and so popular, then as now illuminating a world that often seems very much like our own.

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NOTES

- 1 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 17–18.
- 2 Lisa Jardine, “Strains of Renaissance Reading,” *English Literary Renaissance* 25:3 (Autumn 1995): 296–97.
- 3 James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 117.
- 4 Simon Thurley, “The Lost Palace of Whitehall,” *History Today* 48:1 (January 1998): 51.
- 5 Richard Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham: Holinshed’s Impertinent History,” in *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain: History, Rhetoric, and Fiction, 1500–1800*, ed. Donald R. Kelley and David Harris Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), p. 145.
- 6 Lauro Martines, “The Protean Face of Renaissance Humanism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 107.
- 7 James Tracy, “From Humanism to the Humanities: A Critique of Grafton and Jardine,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 139.
- 8 William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), from *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), vol. 1, p. 226.
- 9 Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poetrie* (1595), sig. Cl; also in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, vol. 1, p. 156, as *An Apologie for Poetrie*.