Catherine Atkinson

Inventing Inventors in Renaissance Europe

Spätmittelalter und Reformation Neue Reihe, 33.

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007. Pp. xiv, 325.

In this dense, meticulous, yet readable study of the *De inventoribus rerum* of Italian humanist Polydore Vergil (c. 1470–1555), Catherine Atkinson has shed new light on a highly significant presence in sixteenth-century encyclopedism, religion, and history of ideas. Vergil's work appeared over several decades: the first three books, published in 1499, being supplemented with five more in 1521. There is an authoritative critical text and translation of books I–III by Brian Copenhaver (2002); for books IV–VIII, Benno Weiss and Louis Pérez's translation of all eight books (1997) is very useful.

Originally Atkinson's 2005 doctoral dissertation at the Universität Hannover, *Inventing Inventors* gratifyingly provides the level of analysis one would anticipate in the wake of Copenhaver's seminal 1978 article on Vergil, "The Historiography of Discovery in the Renaissance," and his subsequent work. Atkinson also considerably revises and supplements Denys Hay's 1952 literary biography of Vergil, which, like Copenhaver's work, has gone largely unanswered in kind until now, although several excellent smaller-scale studies of specific aspects of Vergil's work have appeared. As Hay, Copenhaver, and Atkinson all observe, despite its great influence in its time and Vergil's special affection for it, the *De Inventoribus* has suffered heavily from the eclipse of his renown in later centuries, which the above-named scholars are attempting to re-establish. This work has recently attracted less attention than his *Anglica Historia*, encouraged by Henry VII and first published in 1534—yet even this history has yet to be completely edited.

Inventing Inventors is divided into eight chapters following a brief preface. Chapter 1, the introduction, defines this study's terms and surveys previous scholarship. Atkinson translates *inventores* as "inventors" and *inventio* as "invention," in preference to Copenhaver's "discovery" and Weiss and Pérez's "beginnings and discoveries." The *De inventoribus* participates in a longstanding tradition, that of heurematography: the history of technical and scientific inventions and discoveries. Yet this emerges as only one of several facets of the complex inventor topos, as Atkinson traces it in Chapter 2, from Antiquity and Jewish thought through Vergil's own times, when the problem is philological—preoccupied with naming inventions with linguistic exactitude—rather than the kind of natural-scientific methodology it would become from the seventeenth century onward. His life as an Italian-born churchman, diplomat, and humanist author who spent most of his career in England

is recounted in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 introduces and outlines the topics covered by *De inventoribus*, along with its sources and a chronology of modern scholarship, translations, and editions. Vergil's praise of man as inventor, the central topic of Books I–III, is the subject of Chapter 5.

An exceptionally rich Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of Books IV–VIII, which survey the origins of Church institutions, harking back to their pagan and Jewish origins, and their interrelationship with the concept of invention. It then offers four case-studies, illustrating how Vergil analyzed various types of “beginnings”—actually borrowings or survivals—as Atkinson endeavors to reveal him as a “pioneer in early ethnography and comparative religion,” and finally, to demonstrate how his career experience, coupled with his research, inform his views of the clergy. Atkinson has only briefly sketched out his theological importance in his own time, in order to leave deeper examination of the relation of his ideas to those of such contemporaries as Luther and Erasmus for future work. Chapter 7 discusses the reception history and influence of *De inventoribus*, in Latin or in translation, across different sixteenth-century religious-historical contexts, and diachronically through the seventeenth century, ending with a spirited demonstration of its tacit presence in Rabelais, particularly the *Quart Livre*.

Chapter 8 summarizes Atkinson's overall conclusions, of which the most provocative is that Vergil is a thinker ahead of his time even by Renaissance standards, in that, inspired by the celebrated Bolognese professor Filippo Beroaldo, he heralds what might now be termed multiculturalism and a more scientific approach to historiography in commenting on current affairs. Yet Vergil's polymath approach may also have caused him to be underappreciated. The *De Inventoribus* itself is a hybrid book, aimed at an international audience: Books I through III, dedicated to fellow Urbino humanist Ludovico Odassio, are an encyclopedia of intellectual, artistic, scientific and practical achievements, rooted in classical sources yet steeped in biblical and patristic learning as well, and very successful as a unit in 1499, while the later Books IV–VIII—apparently written at his brother's urging, after Vergil's politically motivated imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1515—were less literary, devoted to elucidating Christian religious institutions and rituals, just as Luther was questioning them in his more flamboyant theses. While positing, via historical-contextual analysis, that these latter books can be said to define Christian “inventions” and thus relate to the first three, Atkinson also suggests that by publishing his theological treatises in such precarious times under the same title as the well-received earlier section of the *De inventoribus*, Vergil was sheltering his controversial work while still making it available.

Atkinson has thus convincingly rediscovered what Terence Cave might have deemed a “cornucopian text” in his classic 1979 study of such better-known contemporaries as Erasmus, Rabelais, and Montaigne. If she does not mention Cave, her select bibliography contains virtually all other pertinent primary and secondary sources. There follow five appendices documenting Vergil’s career and sources, plus a list of references to the *inventores* topos in authors from Hyginus to Samuel Johnson and Diderot. A detailed index completes this volume. The book has been carefully produced, with only one typo caught by this reviewer (page 155, line 1), although it is odd—perhaps a Renaissance-humanistic prejudice—that “the middle ages” is not capitalized. For its substantial and clearly-presented contribution to Renaissance culture and its transmission, this book belongs in every university library.

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Anthony Grafton

What was History?: The Art of History in Early Modern Europe

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. ix, 319.

What was History? provides a revised and extended version of the four Trevelyan lectures delivered by Anthony Grafton in 2005 on the development of historical thought and practice in the Renaissance. The title is a deliberate evocation of E.H. Carr’s *What is History?* (1962), based on his own series of Trevelyan lectures, which I recall being given to read as an eighteen year old, who had never really thought what history was or why I was proposing to devote three years at university to its study. These are questions that each generation of historians must address, but there are times when the answers that satisfied the previous generation are found wanting.

As Grafton explains in his introductory comments, the opening of the eighteenth century and the years following World War II were both such periods, when scholars questioned what had become the contemporary orthodoxy concerning the definition and methodology of history. Within the restricted compass of a book based on the original lectures, Grafton traces the way in which ideas about how history should be written, read, and evaluated developed over two centuries to produce the *artes historicae* against which Enlightenment scholars reacted.

The first chapter begins with an introduction that describes the fracturing in the Republic of Letters at the turn of the eighteenth century, as represented by the traditionalist ancient historian Jacob Perizonius and the iconoclastic journalist Jean Le Clerc. It then proceeds to discuss the origins of the humanist approach to