Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Elaine V. Beilin. *Redeeming Eve. Women Writers of the English Renaissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Pp. xxiv, 346.

In a finely crafted work Elaine V. Beilin undertakes, through this first in depth study of thirty women writers of the English Renaissance, her colossal task of *Redeeming Eve* (Princeton University Press, 1987). Two 1930s doctoral studies had concluded that as a group, women writers of the English Renaissance "form an early modern tradition of women's writing" (xvi). Building upon this pioneering scholarship, Beilin adds a new dimension in her investigation into how these women were influenced by the social and literary attitudes of the time. She concludes that there were three major ways in which the concept of women influenced these writers: firstly, it motivated them to write; secondly, it controlled by limiting what and how they wrote; thirdly and yet ambivalently, it encouraged them to subvert the expectations of their writing (xvii–xviii).

As much a product of their cultural environment as their male counterparts, these women writers were caught in an untenable situation. Praised for the passive virtues which they internalized and which then defined them, when they became writers they were actors in a veritable theatre of the absurd. Not only did they have to write about their limited sphere of activities, they had to use an intellect whose existence was denied to subvert their private and domestic role. Beilin underscores the irony implicit in the historical fact that in finding their voice, these women of Tudor and early Stuart England carved out their own niche. For these women writers society and literary tradition meet in ambivalence.

Beilin uses the architectural metaphor of the late medieval writer Christine de Pisan's *Cité des Dames* to divide her study of the 100 year sweep (1524–1623) of women writing into three parts. Written in direct response to the devaluing of women's intellect and creativity, de Pisan's structural metaphor is used to show how sturdy is the foundation on which women's writing is built; how it developed into "Mighty towers and strong bastions"; and how it hedged itself with "Lofty walls all around" (xxiii–xxiv).

The sturdy foundations of Part I cover the years 1524–1544 in four chapters that trace the growing tradition of women's writing in prose, poetry and translations. In addition to discussing the cultural setting created by such great Renaissance humanists as Thomas More, Beilin identifies how restricting was the liberal education and

the "decorum of language" (25) they advocated. Mary More Roper, daughter of Thomas More, is an extraordinary example of the success of the humanist ideal of the learned and virtuous woman (16,21). Not less impressive is the opposing self-portrait of Anne Askew whose heroic battle against all authority made her into the first Protestant martyr.

The publication between 1545–1605 of fifteen prose religious works and translations by women of different social ranks is seen by Beilin as an important link between "women's traditional spirituality and their developing literary calling." (48) Not all the famous women Reformist prose writers survived the religious and political dangers of the time. When these writers saw themselves both as spiritual teachers and poets, they faced the additional task of overcoming the literary convention that poets were male.

"The Mighty Towers and Strong Bastions" of Part II fittingly begins with an examination of the talents and literary development of Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561–1621). In the history of women writing, she is the first to be concerned with writing itself. Female dramatists who now use the female archetype of the Christian soul are building upon Mary Sidney's attempt to embody the hero in woman, and to indicate how the private virtues of women could bring about heroic actions. No longer do female images and symbols merely represent feminine type or allegorical figures. They have become a writer. When Aemilia Lanyer praises women's virtues she is, unlike her contemporaries, John Donne and Ben Jonson, creating an image of beneficent feminine power. In perceiving women as speaking and acting wisely, Lanyer was "redeeming Eve" (179, 182).

What one critic has termed the "mythology of patronage" that surrounded the Sidneys provided a positive influence on Mary Wroth, gifted offspring of this pre-eminent family. In being the first woman to write a prose romance and a sonnet sequence, she broke new ground moving beyond Lanyer's poetry of praise to explore the question of heroic virtue. Her virtuous monarch Pamphilia who was also a constant lover and a poet is a successful challenge of the masculine standards of heroism. Unfortunately, no Jacobean woman writer pursued the possibilities now open to them.

Part III, "Lofty Walls All Around," is the final chapter of the book. Here Beilin accounts for women writers' return to the restrictive perspective of traditional feminine identity. She sees it as arising from their obvious return to defending women from misogynist attacks, and their developing the uniquely feminine genre of the mother's advice book. Beilin concludes that in merely modifying a masculine genre to discredit the style and views of the opponent, these writings do not make the breakthrough into a feminine consciousness.

In *Redeeming Eve*, Beilin clearly spells out her theoretical position. Wherever appropriate she provides detailed analyses of the works of women writers to illustrate her theories and to support her conclusions. Evidently, her empathy is with these writers but it does not distort her critical appraisal of the varying quality of the writings nor her understanding of the society that formed and inhibited these

writers. Beilin also captures the underlying tension between the male artistic world and that of the woman artist trying to create. Her impeccable research leads her to the conclusion that even the most gifted and sensitively nurtured woman artist had to be not merely very talented but able to withstand the fact that she was constantly judged as a woman who only happened to write.

The notes provided on each chapter are excellent and are followed by a list of works by women for the period. The accurate index that concludes the bibliographical material enhances the usefulness of this truly outstanding contribution to feminist literature and the literature of Renaissance England.

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Michael J. Heath. *Crusading Commonplaces: La Noue, Lucinge and Rhetoric against the Turks*. Genève, Droz, 1986, 113p.

Nul n'était mieux placé que M. J. Heath pour écrire un ouvrage sur les Turcs dans l'opinion européenne de la Renaissance. Il avait déjà composé d'excellents articles sur des sujets connexes, comme l'opinion des humanistes quant à l'origine de l'ethnie turque et celle d'Erasme à propos de la guerre contre l'empire ottoman, comme la participation de René de Lucinge à une expédition navale. De cet auteur, il a aussi préparé l'édition critique du traité *De la naissance, durée et chute des Estats*. Son ouvrage dans ce champ d'études est donc marqué par la somme des connaissances acquises depuis plus d'une décennie. Il contient d'ailleurs beaucoup plus que ce qu'annonce son titre et malgré sa brièveté, il constitue une synthèse riche et vivante des conceptions entretenues au seizième siècle sur la guerre contre les Turcs.

Ecartant d'emblée la vision positive développée sur la Turquie à partir des récits de voyageurs, dont C. D. Rouillard s'était déjà fait l'analyste, M. J. Heath entend ne s'intéresser qu'aux textes appelant à la guerre, d'où son choix de La Noue qui, en deux chapitres de ses *Discours*, propose une stratégie militaire d'alliance de tous les chrétiens pour la prise de Constantinople, et de Lucinge, aux propos plus machiavéliques de «déstabilisation» de l'empire ottoman. Techniques, ces deux textes ne sont cependant pas dépourvus des lieux communs qui accompagnent toute propagande offensive contre la Sublime Porte, sur la barbarie des Turcs, leur volonté de domination universelle, le gémissement des peuples qui subissent leur joug. Mais M. J. Heath ne se contente pas de montrer comment ces généralités rhétoriques sont dépassées par les perspectives dynamiques et dialectiques de La Noue et de Lucinge. Il rétablit tout le système des médiations qui relie les conceptions bellicistes de ces auteurs à la pensée et à l'imaginaire collectifs de leur temps.

Sous un titre un peu réducteur se cache alors un ouvrage qui appartient à l'histoire des mentalités de laquelle il fournit une précieuse démonstration. Négligeant l'énumération des lieux communs rhétoriques et la paraphrase des deux traités, M.