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In Defending Literature in Early Modern England, Robert Matz raises the question of how literary discourse represents and positions itself in relation to the arrangements of class and power in Tudor England. The touchstone for Matz’s analysis is Horace’s famous formulation of poetry’s ability to “profit and delight.” In his alert reading of three major Tudor texts in their social and cultural moments — Sir Thomas Elyot’s Boke Named the Governour, Sir Philip Sidney’s A Defence of Poetry, and Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene, Book 2 — Matz demonstrates how the Horatian formula deployed by these humanist writers to defend literature embeds and plays out contradictions and conflicts in standards and ideas of aristocratic conduct.

The historical setting of his study is the century-long crisis of the Tudor aristocracy: the waning of its feudal privileges and practices; the development of the centralized, bureaucratic monarchy; the cultural impact of humanist intellectuals who sought to instruct, reform, or enter the noble class. Matz correlates the “instructive” impetus of the Horatian formula with the development of humanist and Protestant emphases on self-discipline and public service; the “delight” suggested in the Horatian formula carried, in its turn, a nostalgia for aristocratic entitlement to the private pleasures of life grandly, extravagantly lived. Each of the writers studied by Matz seeks differently to adapt the emerging humanist-Protestant valorization of virtue, self-discipline, and industry to traditional aristocratic values of material consumption, leisure, and self-display.

Elyot’s Boke Named the Governour provides Matz an early instance in England of the effort to relate humanist learning, rhetoric, and eloquence to the systems of privilege and access to power which organize Tudor material culture. These systems themselves were being transformed by the consolidation of power in Henry VIII’s court and the consequent need for literate functionaries to staff and
operate the developing bureaucracies. Since wealth and title no longer guaranteed courtly standing or influence, the new learning, and the new prospects of power, wealth, and influence it seemed to open, rendered ambiguous the signs and practices which traditionally determined and reinforced class identity and privilege. In Matz’s reading, Elyot is a humanist cultural conservative, who registers his own ambivalences about the cultural capital of humanist studies in his text and struggles to persuade the traditional nobility of a revised program of educational commitments, founded in humanist learning, which would make the class serviceable rather than marginal to the expanding bureaucracy of Henry’s regime.

Sidney has been taken as the living image of Elyot’s reformed governor, a nobleman committed to humanist learning and to public service, explicitly in the cause of Protestant international activism. In his great Defence of Poetry, Sidney tries to reconcile the Protestant call to vigorous civil responsibility with the preservation of traditional prerogatives of nobility; he “does not subordinate courtly pleasure to Protestant politics, but defends the court from Protestant criticisms of its pleasures, including criticisms of poetry” (p. 58). Matz traces the insistent correlations between Sidney’s idealizing defense of poetry and the terms of that defence, which have their source in the aristocratic life of leisure and consumption: “The golden world that the poet delivers has a local habitation in the golden worlds of the Elizabethan nobility, those prodigy houses and elaborately formal parks and gardens that, by the end of the sixteenth century, defined aristocratic status as much as military service” (p. 67). But despite Sidney’s efforts to associate poetry’s exemplification and inculcation of virtue with a revived chivalric and warrior ideal, he signals uneasiness with these claims by associating writing with the feminization of aristocratic culture. The antithesis of feminine needle and masculine sword, developed by Sidney to stress poetry’s manliness and aspiration to heroic achievement, actually serves to undermine that aspiration (p. 69). Matz notes that the writer’s implement, the pen, and the scene of writing, which requires leisure, solitude, and private concentration, align the poet’s work much more closely with the ornamental needlework of court ladies than with the blood, sweat, and tears of heroic cavaliers in the field. Thus “writing inevitably becomes in the Defence a kind of disappointing self-abuse, in which poetry reproduces the contradictions it would ideally solve” (p. 66). The resolution of these contradictions proved to be not in the literary text, but in the heroic closure of a life which completed and glossed the literary text. Matz demonstrates how the legend of Sidney’s participation in the Dutch revolt, and his brave but perhaps needless death at Zutphen, mediates between the antinomies of Protestant and courtly values which his writing, finally, could not resolve. The glamorous death provides a lasting emblem of aristocratic self-expenditure, but in the service of a Protestant cause (pp. 85–87).

Sidney writes as a nobleman, to other nobles, assuming the class privileges and the attention of a courtly insider. Spenser, like Elyot, a humanist writer aspiring to courtly recognition and patronage, is an outsider, who stations himself in his allegorical romance as potential instructor and guide to an aristocracy whose sense
of its own pleasures and prerogatives would be reformed by reading his poem. Matz argues that the organizing virtue of *The Faerie Queene*’s Book 2, temperance, is the paradigmatic virtue of the whole poem, mediating, as the poem at large does, between sensuous delight and ethical discipline, indulgence and endurance, amplitude and rigor, anarchic knight-errantry and the endless work of middle-class self-regulation, the pleasures, ease, and extravagance of courtly aristocracy and the profitable works and self-discipline of activist Protestant humanism. The Palmer is Spenser’s central projection of his own task in this book: “Together [Guyon and the Palmer] serve as Spenser’s model for the close and reliable relationship between courtier-patron and counselor-poet — or aristocratic student and humanist tutor” (p. 108). Matz follows Sir Guyon’s progress to several sites in Book 2 which emblematize Spenser’s efforts at cultural mediation and reform. Medina’s reconciliation and healing of the competitive violence between her two sisters Elissa and Perissa (2.2) provides an idealized model of moderating hospitality that would provide pleasure without waste or extravagant self-display (pp. 90–91). Matz treats the Cave of Mammon episode (2.7) as a parable about the dehumanizing risks of the emerging mercantile economy. The dream of wealth proffered by Mammon is a nightmare representation of mercantile exploitation and labor regimentation (pp. 115–16). The narrative counterpoint to the Mammon episode is the magnificent Bower of Bliss (2.12), which renders its temptations in terms recognizable to the court as the extravagant pleasures of its own traditional self-image. Matz nicely analyzes the iconoclasm of Guyon’s destruction of the Bower in terms of how the pleasure of the text supersedes the traditional aristocratic materialist pleasures represented there (p. 124). Spenser thus provides a textual solution to the dilemma that riddles Sidney’s *Defence*. He depicts a mode of pleasure both fitting to and instructive of aristocratic self-definition, and therefore “profitable” in the humanist sense, because its site is the poetic text itself, and its scene of both instruction and pleasure is the act of reading. Spenser’s poetry “opens the category of the aesthetic” (p. 125) as a field of value which establishes its own ground of appeal to the political and social elite in the late Elizabethan period.

*Defending Literature in Early Modern England* is an astute and honest, hard-working and well-written book. Matz is diligent in resisting the idealizing tendency he notices in major New Historicist criticism, which tends to reproduce literature’s assertions and mystifications of its own social power. The reformatory and instructive “power of literature” is certainly a major claim that Renaissance texts want to make on their own behalf, but Matz studies the problematic nature of that claim, both on the evidence of ambivalence and contradiction within the texts, and on other evidence, historical and discursive, of how social and political power was organizing itself in the shift from feudal to early modern class relations and governance in the Tudor regimes. Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction between material, social, and cultural capital provides Matz with a useful analytic model to clarify and evaluate the specific claims and impact of Renaissance humanist studies, and of the literature it sponsored, in competition with traditional interests.
and investments of the ruling class. Matz sympathetically understands and explains the New Historicist concern to disclose “the power of literature” in crucial Renaissance texts as a response to the crisis in literary studies in the contemporary university: “Contemporary historicist criticism has found in the sixteenth century’s anxious defense of literature’s place an echo of its own concerns, and has responded by adopting rather than historicizing that defense” (p. 17). Although Matz cannot be expected to resolve the contemporary academic crisis, he provides something of a way forward, with a historicizing treatment that defines and respects the distinctive space that literature creates and sustains for itself. He might have followed through on this insight and given greater attention to how both Sidney and Spenser privilege poetry over history as more pleasurable, profitable, and truthful. Although, as a historicist critic, Matz could easily shrug this claim off as the text’s mystification of its own powers and processes, it might nevertheless be, in ways that strict historicism cannot account for, true. There is something in many of us who read and teach these texts which is left unsatisfied by a rigorously historicist analysis of the sort he proposes. Fortunately for Matz, and his readers, he is not quite as rigorously materialist in his analysis as he intends to be; he is too lovingly invested in these books and their writers. He not only historicizes with considerable sympathy the texts of Renaissance humanism that are the subject of his book, but humanizes the New Historicism that motivates and organizes his analysis.

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Sir Thomas Overbury, the intimate friend of James I’s favourite, the Earl of Somerset, died in the Tower of London in 1613. Two years later, the scandalous claims that he had been murdered, possibly with a poisoned enema, and that his murder had been procured by Lord Somerset and his wife Frances, spread across and beyond England. A series of trials took place, in the course of which four of the accused were executed, and the Somersets were sentenced to death, pardoned, and sent to live in a big house in the country. It was at this time that Simonds D’Ewes obtained a copy of an anagram which was making the rounds in manuscript: Thomas Overburie — O! O! a busie murther. Its execution was indeed, if all the stories are true, busy, and as anybody who has worked in the field is well aware, it kept the scribes busy too; Bellany cites well over a hundred manuscript sources, excluding the three- or four-hundred relevant manuscripts in the series of State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office. The story continues to generate retellings, the most recent book-length ones being Beatrice White’s Cast of Ravens (1965) and Lady Anne Somerset’s Unnatural Murder (1997), both of which, as