

Writing Tudor Humanism and Barbarism

Zsolt Almási and Mike Pincombe (ed.), *Writing the Other: Humanism versus Barbarism in Tudor England* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008).

In 2006, Hungary's Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Piliscsaba hosted the Fifth International Conference of the Tudor Symposium under the topic of "Humanity and Barbarism in Tudor Literature." The recently published collection of essays generated by this meeting, *Writing the Other: Humanism versus Barbarism in Tudor England*, edited by Zsolt Almási and Mike Pincombe, acts as a testament to what was evidently a lively and thoughtful event, neatly situated, as the volume points out, in what was considered in the English Tudor era to be the "frontier between Christians and the others, the human, humane and the barbarian" (1). The volume's eleven articles, together with Almási's Introduction, represent a rich and varied investigation, valuable for students of humanism, Renaissance conceptions of Otherness, and of Tudor literature.

In his Introduction, Almási cleanly sketches his approach to the volume, merging discourses of English proto-colonialism with those of history of the

book. Writing in Tudor England, he suggests, "in the new context of print culture," served as "a tool for creating a self-identity with an eye on the rhetorical, religious, poetic, [and] national expectations of the readers" (2). Humanism, which through the Tudor era had become reoriented from its lofty philosophical chains of being towards issues of pragmatism, became invested instead in "specific social, sociological, religious, and cultural" self-definitions (6). Apparently, Almási follows coeditor Mike Pincombe in seeing a shift in the late Tudor perspective towards questions of humanism, as humanism came to be regarded not only as a high-minded philosophical endeavor, but also as a practical one – sometimes even with skepticism and an emphasis on its mere "technical expertise and stylistic flair."¹

Among the practical processes of defining humans socially, sociologically, religiously, and culturally, according to Almási, was representation in opposition to a Hegelian Other – the barbarian. Almási finds anxiety in evidence in the writings of the Tudor era, produced by the paradoxical distancing and simultaneous closeness to such Others which occurred through the act of representation and projection. His closing example, taken from a text published just after the end of the Tudor era, reads this collapse of self-confirmation and self-critique in John Finet's translation of Rene de Lucinge's *The Beginning, Continuance, and Decay of Estates* (1606).

The views expressed in the book reviews do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors of *The AnaChronisT*.

While the text predictably presents its Turkish Others as demonized barbarians, at the same time the Christians appear to be weaker, less loyal, and greedier than their Turkish counterparts. Furthermore, as Lucinge enjoins the Christian states to unite in opposition against the Turks, he recommends that books with “a shew pleasantness and delight” be used to subtly spread the poison of doubt for their religion throughout the Turkish territories. In this way Lucinge’s text calls into question the moral superiority of the Christians it addresses over the barbarians they are to conquer, and the book, which ought to lift the Christian learner towards the divine, becomes instead “a means of mass destruction” (17).

The gladiatorial opposition in the volume’s subtitle, *Humanism* versus *Barbarism*, with a wink, evokes its dichotomy only to dismantle it as “naïve boundaries . . . disappear” (8). Several articles in the volume closely follow the Introduction’s model, reading accounts of barbaric Otherness which act both as distancing confirmers of selfhood and self-superiority and, at the same time, evocative reminders of similar domestic barbaric tendencies. Elizabeth Heale, for example, examines Stephen Parmenius of Buda’s travel narrative *De navigatione* in which the Catholic Spaniards’ barbaric treatment of the comparatively innocent Amerindians (who wait openly for conversion) highlights their status as Other, while at the same time the poem echoes the cruelty of the English’s own

colonial campaign. And Andrew Hiscock demonstrates the manner in which Sir Walter Raleigh “invites his readers to identify possible versions of themselves and their cultural experience with those of the inhabitants of a continent across the Atlantic” (198) and to contrast themselves with Catholic Spaniards, only to reveal at the end of his career glimpses at the similarity between the Spaniards’ behavior in the Americas and the English colonization efforts in Ireland.

The articles in this collection challenge the dichotomy set up by the title through an exuberant menagerie of *barbarisms* and *barbarians* and of *humans*, *humanes*, and *humanisms*. Barbarians may be residents of Barbary, and Francis Guinle sees a conscious effort in George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* to use the term to signify “North African,” a designation of race rather than religion, and not necessarily negative within the play’s dramatic (rather than historical) perspective. Yet barbarians are not always non-Western, nor even non-Protestants, like the Spanish in Heale and Hiscock’s discussions, but may even be English. Kinga Földváy sees William Harrison’s depiction of poverty in *A Description of Elizabethan England* as a project of criminalizing and dehumanizing the English poor – one which may have had its roots in the rhetoric of the humanist Mirandola’s chain of being. Erzsébet Stróbl explores the figure of the wild man in pageants designed for Elizabethan progresses and

entertainments and his openness to “humanizing” in response to courtly virtue. As Amina Alyal shows in her exploration of the rhyme and rhythm debate in Renaissance literary theory, popular “home-grown” poetic forms could be viewed as barbaric in contrast with courtly imitations of Classical forms – opposing conventions both accommodated in Shakespeare’s versification.

Humanism’s Classical roots also play a key role in Gunilla Florby’s article, as she argues that the lauding of barbarous cruelty present in George Chapman’s *Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron* stems directly from engagement with Classical heroes and texts. Peter Happé examines the protean identities of both humanism and author John Heywood, providing the volume’s most detailed account of English humanism – which was “hardly a coherent philosophy or set of beliefs” (119) – and demonstrating the degree to which Heywood’s work does and does not reflect his humanist models. Ágnes Matuska demonstrates that the characters called Vices in English Tudor drama, despite their barbaric nonsense language and evident links with popular culture, are at the same time surprisingly not antithetical to humanism’s spirit of logical joking, nor are they necessarily rejected by the plays in which they feature.

Defining barbarism in terms of its relation to comprehensible language, as Matuska does, is a key feature of several of the collection’s articles. As Hiscock

points out, “the very notion in the West of barbarism, that which is culturally antagonistic and othered, looks back to . . . those who could not decode the Ancient Greek language (*barbaros*) and who seemed to communicate with empty mouthings[:] ‘bar bar’ ” (198). Pauline Blanc notes this original meaning as she suggests through her reading of Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene’s *A Looking Glasse for London and England* that the late 1580s saw a change in meaning of *barbarism* from indicating an incomprehensible mode of speech to an uncivilized, uncultured, and ignorant condition – one which could be present at both ends of seemingly hierarchical oppositions. And, carefully tracing humanist treatments of the term *barbarus* as signifying someone incapable of conveying ideas or comprehending civilized language across the sixteenth century and through several languages, Benedek Péter Tóta explores a network of texts connected to Sir Thomas More’s *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* and its account of the Ottoman victory over Hungary at the Battle of Mohács, effectively echoing the conference’s Hungarian location and its relation to Tudor Europe.

Recent years have seen a number of reexaminations of humanism and the host of explorations of early English responses to Otherness which has steadily increased since the 1980s; but *Writing the Other* provides a useful drawing together of these subjects in a thought-provoking spirit of plurality. The vol-

ume's eclecticism necessarily trades cohesion for this diversity, but its articles represent well the investigative richness of this topic. Almási acknowledges – even celebrates – in his Introduction the critical problem that “a complete, comprehensive and unified picture” has not yet been “drawn of all the cultural-literary phenomena that can be classified under the heading: ‘humanism,’ ‘human’ *versus* ‘barbarism,’ ‘barbarian,’ ” yet the volume’s variety of voices layers in an effective outline in colorful decoupage.

Karen Kettlich

Note

1. Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century* (London: Pearson, 2001), p. 12.

Portraits for Milton

Neil Forsyth, *John Milton: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008)

The cover page of Neil Forsyth’s new book on Milton consists of two paintings. One is a portrait of the mature poet, with long, curly locks and a characteristic look of self-confidence and pride. The other, due to its size and placement appearing somewhat like a background for the portrait, is a Civil War battle scene, featuring Oliver Cromwell in its centre. Milton and Cromwell face each other, so at first glance it seems that a Lilliputian army is

engaged in a hopeless fight against a Gargantuan, invincible Milton. This cover is meaningful in more than one way; in fact, it seems to imply the *ars poetica* of the volume. Through a detailed account of Milton’s life (and works), filled, at the same time, with as much background information as possible, there unfolds a constant struggle in front of the readers’ eyes, a battle between Forsyth and the topic which stresses the boundaries of the short book to the extreme. The imaginary struggle is eventually won by the author; however, as is often the case in battles, there are notable casualties.

The modest title of the book is somewhat misleading, since not only do we get a clear-cut biography of Milton, but most of his works are also introduced in a compelling way, with many a carefully selected quotation. Tone is instantly calibrated by the tiny *Preface*, which is a weird but honest authorial apology. The jocular voice is immediately catching, first in the confession of guilty dreams about unique Milton autographs, and then, when the purpose of the book is explicitly declared: “to transmit to as wide a readership as possible the results of the scholarly researches of others, along with some of my own opinions” (7). No illusions here: instead of long lists of footnotes and detailed bibliographies (although the primary debts – to Gordon Campbell, and to Barbara K. Lewalski – are aptly recognised), we should anticipate a good read intended for the general reader.