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## Voices of Dissent

Jonathan Crewe

*Dartmouth College*, [crewe@dartmouth.edu](mailto:crewe@dartmouth.edu)

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## VOICES OF DISSENT Jonathan Crewe

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*The Unrepentant Renaissance:  
From Petrarch to Shakespeare to  
Milton* by Richard Strier. Chicago:  
University of Chicago Press, 2011.  
Pp. 328. \$46.00 cloth.

Taking his cue, and virtually his book title, from Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Repentance" ("Du repentir"), Richard Strier argues that major Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation authors did not necessarily uphold what he calls the official values of the time: reason, patience, moderation of anger, subordination of the physical to the spiritual, ordinary decency and morality, rejection of materialism and worldliness, and assertion of the need for humility. Authors could, on the contrary, challenge all these values and often did. This argument recalled to my mind a moment in a Shakespeare Association of America seminar years ago in which a prominent English academic, having been hauled over the coals by seminar members, finally said, "Oh, I see. You want me to be humble. Well, I won't be."

For Strier, the *official values* represent a Christian-Platonic synthesis to which all were expected to subscribe. Strier wants to make the case that, in being "bumptious, full-throated, perhaps perverse" (2), Renaissance and Reformation authors frequently proved recalcitrant, yet the reader may already pull up short to ask, "Who ever thought otherwise?" Names like those of Pietro Aretino (surprisingly, not mentioned in the book), Leon Battista Alberti, Michelangelo

Buonarotti (as poet), Giordano Bruno (one footnote), Niccolò Machiavelli (passing reference), Galileo Galilei (passing reference), Pico della Mirandola (not mentioned, although “the dignity of man” looms large in the book), François Rabelais (not mentioned), Benvenuto Cellini (passing reference), Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, and Ben Jonson are known to everyone and not known for tame acquiescence. (God forbid that we should recall the painter Caravaggio here.) Even if one is not on the lookout for the more insurrectionary spirits, which major English Renaissance author was free of bumptiousness, full-throatedness, or perversity? William Shakespeare? George Chapman? John Donne? Philip Sidney? John Marston? Thomas Middleton? Andrew Marvell?

The question, then, is why Strier feels he has to argue a point that, on the face of it, no one would dispute. Part of Strier’s implied answer is that resistance to the official values could be pursued on a principled, systematic basis. It wasn’t just a matter of bad boys (or girls) acting out. (Regrettable, in a way, since resistance to the official values thus tends to become more a matter of principled, civil debate than misbehavior.) If the official values were Christian and Platonic, Renaissance authors could appeal

against them to Aristotle for the vindication of proper pride, of greatness of mind or soul, and of just self-estimation. Those values could be opposed to the official ones on both ethical and worldly grounds; ethical in that they discountenanced excessive or futile self-abjection (not without its own overreaching vanity); worldly in that they gave credit to dignified social appearances. According to Strier, this ethical Aristotelianism placed humanistically schooled Renaissance writers implicitly, but nevertheless often and deeply, at odds with the leading Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, both of them insisting on radical human unworthiness and depravity. In the reformers’ book, repentance was certainly called for, even if it remained unavailing without grace. Yet even when a writer like John Milton marched under the banner of Protestant Christianity, he remained, in Strier’s view, an unrepentant Aristotelian. Strier additionally argues that even the Neoplatonism of Plotinus could be enlisted against the prevailing Christian–Platonic synthesis. Plotinus’s conception of value, unlike Plato’s, gave pride of place to multiplicity, diversity, and expansiveness rather than unity and circumscription. His conception of value can therefore be seen as underwriting the triumph of “infinite variety” (2.2.964) and

effortless expansiveness in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Strier offers parallel arguments regarding systematic Renaissance commitments to pleasure, to the bodily, to passion and anger (which “hath privilege,” as Kent says in *King Lear* [2.2.1137]), to exuberant, seductive amorality, and to worldliness. Yet these values were not always baldly opposed to the official ones, but were often intricately knotted up with them, sometimes resulting in excruciated ambivalence on the part of the authors. For Strier, these countervalues are exemplified in important works by Thomas More, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Ignatius Loyola, Montaigne, Descartes, and Milton. Strier supports his contention with generous, perceptive, ample readings, bringing to bear his wide-ranging command of the field and of the languages in which the relevant works were written (Italian, French, Latin). This is the work of a mature scholar-teacher with a good deal to impart.

Indeed, the pedagogic provenance of the book is apparent everywhere, starting with the dedication “To my students, over the years, in ‘Renaissance Intellectual Texts’ at the University of Chicago.” Much of the book reads like the record of a graduate seminar, punctuated by teacherly interjections: “[This line] is completely puzzling”; “But this is all very subtle”; “This is a truly surprising

perspective,” etc. Yet Strier aims not just to teach but also to correct a major misrepresentation of the Renaissance. What is the nature and source of the misrepresentation?

Regarding the nature of the misrepresentation, it is that of a tamed, submissive Renaissance. Regarding the source, it is that of Renaissance criticism pursued by Anglophone critics during the past thirty years. More narrowly speaking, responsibility belongs to the New Historicism and its successors, notably the humoralism espoused by critics like Gail Kern Paster and Michael Schoenfeldt. For Strier, the New Historicism boils down to Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and, to a lesser degree, in *Will in the World* (2005). The point of Strier’s critique is not quite what the opening statements in the book might lead one to expect. It is not that Greenblatt and others after him passively read the Renaissance through the distorting lens of present-day conservatism (a common-enough phenomenon). Rather, it is that the critics’ own theoretical (epistemological) orientation consistently aligns them with everything in the Renaissance that tends to forestall, undermine, or effectively prohibit departures from the official values. In Strier’s view, Greenblatt invokes Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860)

only to contradict it, repeatedly denying the efficacy of every Renaissance assertion of free individuality, passion, or pleasure. Greenblatt's "Renaissance self-fashioning" thus becomes a paradox, since, in effect, the fashioning comes entirely from the outside, making the "self" a function of social constraint. Strier renews allegiance to Burckhardt by reclaiming the efficacy of Renaissance aspiration beyond the constraints of the official values. (Perhaps Strier would consider Greenblatt's most recent book *The Swerve* [2011], detailing humanistic receptivity to the radically discrepant teachings of Lucretius, to be back on the right side.)

In Strier's view, resistance to the official values does not necessarily have to play out as a high drama of dissent. Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* looms surprisingly large in his reckoning as a representation of bourgeois, conjugal sufficiency and being at home in the (mercantile) world. That condition attests in large part to the highly successful Renaissance innovation of companionate marriage. If this innovation hardly seems to flout the official values, it nevertheless prevails over the suspicion and bad conscience instilled by preaching of the official values. One is prompted to reflect, however, that little evidence of this success appears elsewhere in

Shakespeare's work or, indeed, his life. Strier also devotes little space to provocative Renaissance forms of sexual dissent from the official values. That dissent had many classical resources, including Ovid, at its disposal.

There is obviously a bigger story here than I have told or than Strier necessarily wants to tell us in detail. As regards the New Historicism and its aftermath, it is a story having to do with, among other things, the impact of Michel Foucault in the 1980s, with subversion and containment, and with suspicious (paranoid) reading. I suspect that for a number of readers this will now seem like an old story, without much pertinence to current Renaissance interpretation (whatever we understand that to be, bearing in mind that it is not an Anglophone monopoly). These readers may therefore be surprised at Strier's continuing preoccupation with Greenblatt and the New Historicism, as if they still retain a stranglehold on Renaissance interpretation. Something similar applies to Strier's continuing preoccupation with Stanley Fish as a Milton critic. These preoccupations make the book feel belated at times—or like the reflection of a generational mindset—and even Strier's reclamation of the high Burckhardtian Renaissance will seem belated to some. Yet Strier in this book has made a judgment call about what still distorts our

picture of the Renaissance and about the continuing foundational importance of Burckhardt in any practice of Renaissance interpretation worthy of the name. Readers will have to make their own judgment call in turn about all this.

*Jonathan Crewe is the Leon Black Professor of Shakespearean Studies at Dartmouth. He has published extensively on early modern poetry, prose, and drama, and has edited five Shakespeare plays and the narrative poems for the new Pelican Shakespeare. He has also published on South African writing.*