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Mattison, Andrew. Solitude and Speechlessness: Renaissance Writing and Reading in Isolation

Elena Brizio

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Mattison, Andrew.

Solitude and Speechlessness: Renaissance Writing and Reading in Isolation.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. v, 260. ISBN 978-1-4875-0404-5 (hardcover) \$75.

The jacket illustration for this book reproduces a beautiful 1519 engraving by Albrecht Dürer entitled *Saint Anthony Reading*. The saint is concentrated on reading, alone, outside the city. As scholars, we see ourselves reflected in him: the pleasure of reading isolates us from reality but, in many cases, it gives sense to our life. Reading is a personal action that puts us in direct contact with the text, with realities different from our own, with other readers unknown to us who share a text with us, written perhaps with future readers in mind, but perhaps not. Andrew Mattison's book takes its cue from the reception and communication among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers (mainly poets) in order to analyze both the relationship between the writer and the literary text and the social relationship that originates from the sharing of previous texts.

Solitude and Speechlessness is a dense, intense, and demanding book. Using and deepening in detail the analysis of many works by English authors, from Sidney to Donne, from Milton to Puttenham to Bacon, Mattison guides us among the human and professional difficulties of many poets. The fear of success (or rejection) of their work; the social pressure they had to deal with (and not always in a positive way); the political and religious wars of their time; the importance of the printing press and the plagiarism of their works by others. Among the many examples Mattison provides, one of particular interest is the confrontational relationship between editor and author in the case of the Traherne brothers; another is Hugo von Hofmannsthal's reference in his *Ein Brief* (1902) to Francis Bacon and the importance of literary history, a term coined by the same Bacon: "Bacon understands literature as that which can be placed within a long term history of learning" (173).

Reading a text is normally a solitary act; sharing it involves impressions, suggestions, or ideas that the author may have not considered or envisaged. When we suggest a book, we do it on the basis of our personal taste, but we often suggest it to those we assume to have similar tastes to ours. We cannot assume that the author foresaw our reading. Isolated in our intimacy with the book, we are a (happy) "hermit." We are lucky if we can enjoy this solitude.

This is a book that scholars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poetry will appreciate for its detailed, precise, and accurate analysis of canonical works. It provides a re-reading of such works through a peculiar lens: the pursuit, or fear, of the sense of isolation that allows us to find, but also lose, ourselves.

The questions Mattison tries to answer can be posed by contemporary authors as well, and not only poets. For whom do we write? For ourselves? For future glory? For the public? And if we do write for a public, do we envisage an ideal reader who understands but also appreciates our work? Do we risk being read—and judged—by a reader whom we have not considered? Or worse, that our work will not be read and will thus be lost? These are the questions that many living authors are asking themselves.

I appreciated the clear exposition, the detailed analysis of texts and sources, and above all the opportunity to meditate on the fact that, whether for work or for pleasure, many of us write, both for ourselves and for a public that we cannot foresee. We should ask the same questions that the English poets put to themselves and that this book illustrates with abundance of detail.

This is not an “easy” book, but it is a book that deserves to be taken as a model. Although it looks at the past, it is relevant to our own times. *Solitude and Speechlessness* makes us think, and this is what books should do.

ELENA BRIZIO

Georgetown University (Fiesole Campus)

Overell, M. Anne.

Nicodemites: Faith and Concealment between Italy and Tudor England.

St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History 11. Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. xiii, 280. ISBN 978-90-04-33166-2 (hardcover) €125.

Anne Overell’s volume presents a subtle and captivating study of the experiences, and behaviours of a particular group of individuals who found themselves, for political, confessional, or personal reasons, trapped between different fronts of religious and diplomatic controversies, and compelled by fear of ostracism and persecution to adapt, disguise, conceal, or silence their religious beliefs. Looking carefully at the fast-changing and challenging circumstances that led