Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Orgel, Stephen. Wit's Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics

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Stephen Orgel's *Wit's Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics* advances a concise and compelling exploration of how early modern writers, artists, and printers employed ancient exempla to self-authorize early English work products. The title invokes Francis Meres's 1598 *Wit's Treasury, or Palladis Tamia,* a work famously featuring a "best of" catalogue of English writers, their quality determined in relation to ancient Greek and Roman authorities. This book augments Meres's frame by examining how semblances to these authorities were crafted through reuse across genres, forms, and time, liberating Renaissance writers and artists from strict imitation of Greek and Latin sources. Orgel's engaging exploration of the "classical" as a belated socio-aesthetic construction, as a moving target that evolves with changing tastes and politics, generates fresh perspectives from which to reconsider the "Renaissance" writ large.

Chapter 1, "Classicizing England," investigates transmission histories and translation practices over time to demonstrate how early English authors invoked ancient antecedents to self-authorize their works. Geoffrey Chaucer's invocation of a fictional classical Roman author "Lollius" as the source for *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrates that classical authorities—even invented ones—served to legitimize the English vernacular from the outset. Chaucer's real source, Orgel notes, was Boccaccio's *Filostrato,* "contemporary, not ancient; Italian, not Latin" (8). Throughout, Orgel puts pressure on Meres's comparative assessment model for English writers as he examines their struggles to ascertain what is "worth domesticating" (5). Insofar as English translators and imitators did not uniformly adhere to the formal strictures of their sources, Orgel contends that rejections of these models are still forms of deference (3).

The following two chapters examine how English writers negotiated models of classical prosody and sound. Orgel claims that "Latin literacy has been overstated" (39). Early modern writers did not necessarily work directly from Latin sources; most turned to vernacular translations in English and Continental languages. Ancient models offered starting points, but familiar poets, including George Gascoigne, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Watson, and Ben Jonson, were "not at all constrained by them" (40). For example,

Marlowe's translations of Ovid, Musaeus, and Lucan bring "a new tone and a new range of possibilities" that contribute to chapter 3's exploration of what the classical "sounds like" (21). Here, Orgel highlights several failed experiments with translating quantitative verse and rhyme in English prosody, and reviews then-contemporary debates surrounding "what is natural to the language," or "gives pleasure in verse," before concluding that "the stumbling block is the system: to compose English poetry in classical metrics, it is necessary either to misrepresent or to remake the language" (55).

Chapter 4, "What Classical Looks Like," considers and tracks trajectories of taste-making in Tudor England. Here, Orgel offers a persuasive précis of how classically inspired artwork contributes to the articulation of social hierarchies and emerging class systems. Inigo Jones's influence on the Arundel family provides a case study for employing classically inspired artwork to both self-authorize and self-memorialize one's legacy. By the sixteenth century, "great artists became essential to the developing concept of monarchy and to the idealization of the increasingly watered-down aristocracy, to realize and deploy the imagery of legitimacy and greatness" (77).

Much like art, print culture turned to the past to legitimize the present. Chapter 5, "From Black Letter to Roman," examines how antiquity and contemporaneity interact on the printed page. Black letter fonts, for instance, tended to convey a sense of antiquity, whereas the newer Roman-style letters were associated with courtly prestige. Orgel also analyzes how illustrations are recycled across diverse works, pushing past conventional conclusions that this practice was solely driven by economics. He argues that it may be facile to assume that these "disjunctive" illustrations are interpretive write-offs (111). Illustrations can function like punctuation, linking authority and gravitas across works.

Orgel's sixth chapter, "Staging the Classical," underscores the fundamental instability of both dramatic works and generic forms. Again, Rome provides "superficial validation" for then-current socio-political conditions, such as in Henry VII's England where classical settings were employed to reframe debates between the old aristocracy and new meritocracy (126). Of genre, Orgel rightly reminds readers that the fluid boundaries between tragedy and comedy are nothing new, and that the recitations and readings that characterized "closet dramas" should be recognized as performances: "We would do well to reconsider our categories" (133).

The final chapter looks "backward" and reflects that "the classics" long have been a means of rescuing England from "rude vernacular manners." The coinage, however, is eighteenth century, and none agree upon what constitutes the "classic" for more than a generation or two (140). As Orgel has maintained throughout, "the classics" are continually made and remade, both in the service of self-authorization and as historical mirrors. These anachronisms, he persuasively concludes, "are essential; they are what locate us in history. The meaningful re-creation of the past requires the semiotics of the present" (99).

Throughout, Orgel makes a powerful case for the ongoing relevance of "the classics" as vehicles for socio-cultural self-reflection: "[W]e know ourselves through comparison and contrast, through a knowledge of what we are not—we construct the other as a way of affirming the self" (98). Because this work requires prior knowledge to orient oneself, it may be challenging for some readers. But Orgel does much to make "the classics" accessible by demonumentalizing them, by exposing their essential malleability, and by reiterating that "nothing in the past is safely in the past, and the dark side of how productive classical models were was how dangerously pertinent—how alive—they could also be" (99). Overall, *Wit's Treasury* convincingly demonstrates that they still can be.

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