PART ONE
Introduction

1
Introduction

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What does it mean to speak of 'the English Renaissance'? Within the parts of this volume, the first two defining historical contexts and perspectives, the next offering readings of particular texts along with accounts of genres and modes, and the last presenting engagements with a number of critical issues and debates, we approach the question in a variety of ways.

The word 'Renaissance' designates 'rebirth', a metaphor applied, from its beginnings, to a cultural vision that originated in Italy. For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this was projected in a magnificent synthesis by Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Burckhardt retrospectively laid out a master proposal to revive the art and learning of the classical world, to emulate the grandeur of ancient cities, to stimulate science and geographical discovery, and to produce art and literature that imitated antique models, an undertaking which was dedicated as much to the profane as to the spiritual. Rival city states of Italy required monuments to enhance their fame, and thus ensured patronage for the writers and artists who duly bequeathed to posterity the texts and great architectural and visual exemplars with which we are all familiar. Burckhardt's categories, which rest upon notions of 'genius', 'individuality' and secularization, have percolated into all too many derivative handbooks for the period: they may not, however, fit the English experience.

England did enjoy a phenomenal energizing of literature: this is an age that, traditionally, has at its centre, Spenser and Sidney, Marlowe and Nashe, Shakespeare, and Jonson. Ben Jonson, exceptionally, did publish his 'works' in a manner befitting an author of the Renaissance, although some of the dramatic genres he used have medieval origins. The other writers too are as 'medieval' as they are 'Renaissance' – although any endeavour to categorize them in these terms would be not only equivocal but misguided. However, none would have written the way they did without a typical 'Renaissance' education, in particular a vigorous training in classical rhetoric; none would have written what they did without being concerned with the dissemination and imitation of classical forms.[1] The investigation of republicanism in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

(1599) would not have been possible without Plutarch, the political radicalism of Marlowe and Jonson without Tacitus and Livy refracted through Machiavelli, the satires of Nashe without Juvenal and Horace. Ovid's influence is pervasive – as it was in 'the middle ages' – and Platonic ideas of love became familiar through Italian courtesy books. Many writers prefaced their texts in prose or verse with a definition of the role of an author, and many fashioned themselves on classical models. An agenda for a Renaissance author was comprehensive: this was an age of polemic and satire as well as of madrigal verse, of political engagement as well as of lyric grace. Our own age is also inclined to read the personal as the political; we recognise praise for the 'golden' qualities of certain poets at the expense of the 'drab' verse produced by their contemporaries as sign of a past generation's restrained and restrictive 'literary canon'.[2]

This volume ranges from roughly the period of Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) until that of John Milton (1608–74), although there is no attempt to be comprehensive. It moves from the period of Humanism, the age of the revival of *litterae humaniores*, until the time when England had suffered the trauma of its Civil War (to some historians the first significant European revolution) and when Milton had, in *Paradise Lost*, written an epic that magisterially fused classical and Christian traditions in a text that remembers the scars of recent political and cultural upheaval.[3]

It was not until the seventeenth century, the 'age of the baroque' in continental Europe, that there was in England a sense of programmed and collective endeavour in the cognate arts of music, painting or architecture. The Jacobean court masques[4] that epitomize this high combinate art are contemporary with artefacts that are as 'indecorous' as Shakespeare's *Pericles* (1607) or as backward looking as the translations of Iberian chivalric romance that continued to be enjoyed in a manner that suggests that Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605) was quite disregarded. Printing may have generated a 'communication revolution', but circulation of texts in manuscript was the preferred practice in some elite coteries.[5] There was no attempt to design great civic churches or to plan cities before the times of Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723), and country houses and gardens manifest an intriguing union of neo-classical and older romantic styles. While depictions of landscape are almost non-existent in English painting, there are suggestive essays in literary topography.[6] Great examples of English portrait painting abound, but their images are not lifelike but iconic, their subjects explained by allegorical *imprese* or insets rather than fixed by gleams of 'personality'.[7] The fact that diaries were only beginning to be written suggests that 'a new concept of "individuality" is problematic: it certainly did not emerge into the new seventeenth century from Act 1 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*.[8] So any expedition to explore English culture that used as a map, say, Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, an Italian text of 1550 that in its own time set a cultural agenda, would rapidly lose its way – which is why this *Companion* could not be organized around a series of biographies of authors and their 'works'.

Moreover, an 'English Renaissance' is technically an anachronism. The word 'Renaissance' is not recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until the 1840s, the age of John Ruskin. Any idea of a cultural 'revolution' is certainly misleading: literary

and visual artefacts of the period record patterns of evolution from medieval antecedents that are as least as important as their debts to new models of representation and orientation emerging from Italy and later from France. 'Renaissance' also signals points of origin, for capitalist organization of commerce and manufacture, for the reconstitution of political and family institutions, for patterns of identity, status, gender, race and class, for philosophical and political thought. It would be misleading in the extreme to point to specific beginnings for these phenomena, although essays in the 'Issues and Debates' part do approach some of them. A cliché in cultural history is the emergence of 'men of genius' as a sub-species of that epistemological monstrosity 'Renaissance Man'. However, in this sense, 'genius' is another anachronism: the notion derives from the middle of the eighteenth century. Moreover, not only has it occluded the power of material forms and pressures in the production of talent but it is a masculine construction that has excluded the writings of women. Essays in this volume concern themselves with writing by, about and for women.[9] 'Renaissance' is also, conventionally, an aristocratic phenomenon (although it took bourgeois capital to generate the necessary expenditure) and, in the fine arts, traditionally associated with connoisseurship: we redress this with chapters on popular arts of the period.[10] Both endeavours imply varieties of 'counter-canon'.

It has become fashionable to avoid problems of origin by relabelling the era the 'early modern', a term taken from social historians. It reminds us that the period saw the posing of some of the great political and cultural questions that have shaped the forging of modernity, and encourages us to look in texts for scepticism and doubt rather than reconciliation, harmony and 'closure'. But this label also raises difficulties: like 'Renaissance', it suggests a break with a 'medieval' past, implies continuities with what comes later, and, dangerously, invites the importation back into our period of cultural paradigms that we associate with eighteenth-century Enlightenment and even the revolutionary epoch of the early nineteenth century. Essays on allegory, continuities in drama and the longevity of the 'medieval' genre of romance, on witchcraft and on the 'scientific' texts of the period, reveal how distant this foreign country, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, lies from the continents of classical decorum in the arts and of rationality and tolerance in politics and philosophy.

Our period may well be better described as 'Reformation England', a hypothesis I endorse by choosing as a cover illustration a painting owned by Henry VIII, the style of which is immediately apparent as deriving from the Italian High Renaissance but the subject of which, the Pope being stoned by the four evangelists, recalls the religious division and the violence which beset England for a century and a half. Among the illustrations we have included a selection of polemical prints, sometimes brutal and not sufficiently known, on which are inscribed religious divisions in the kingdom, divisions that, inevitably for the times, were also political. The fissiparous energies of religious dissent and reform generated political factionalism and the scrutiny of institutions and culture that could, on the other hand, lead to literary analyses of the highest order. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1603) is not only a massively intel-

ligent probing of the ordeals of Reformation but a paradigm example of the way in which the secular and the religious were inseparable. In such a world Jacob Burckhardt's idea of Renaissance being categorized by the melting into air of 'the veil of illusion' and by the emergence of states that were 'works of art' scarcely fits the realities of early modern England.[11] Sir Thomas More may have produced a blueprint for an ordered society in his *Utopia* but the kind of absolutism needed to sustain his ideals never existed in this period. The reach of the Tudor and Stuart regimes always exceeded their grasp, and essays record as many voices of dissent as consensual choruses. The notion of 'Merry England' can be traced back to the fourteenth century, but the Cade episodes in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* remind us that the happiness the phrase conjures is predicated on a myth of social equality. The rest of the play exposes not only aristocratic factionalism but the terror of a regime dominated by war-lords. Having noted that, however, we must not equate early modern dissent with modern radicalism. Most oppositional writing is fired by religious ideology rather than by political principles derived from any concept of rights.

A single volume can offer neither one definitive overview either of the period nor any single account of how it was seen by contemporaries. Describing the course of history by means of narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends or enclosing parts of extensive cultural fields is problematic. Inspection of the map of this book will reveal lacunae, and its organization will complicate parts of what it seeks to clarify. Its very title will have confronted readers with three difficulties. One is acknowledged: only limited attention could be paid to texts associated with three of the four nations that inhabit 'the British Isles'.[12] That designation emerged in the seventeenth century as an instrument of English political and cultural hegemony – the endeavour is registered specifically in Shakespeare's allegory of empire *Cymbeline* (1610) where 'Britain', the designation for a long wished for but never achieved nation state, occurs no fewer than thirty-four times.[13] I have warned of the snares that derive from using 'Renaissance' to designate both a period and a category of artistic styles within the art and culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain. The third problematic is the way the title links 'literature' with 'culture'. Few readers will be surprised to find chapters in the 'Contexts and Perspectives' part on history, religion, language, and education cheek by jowl with accounts of 'literature'. (The book also offers readings of prints and engravings among 'Genres and Modes', but there was no space, for example, for a separate chapter on music.[14]) These chapters and those on literary forms stand not as accounts of 'background', a misleading metaphor from theatre and the visual arts, but to kindle awareness of cultural pressures: many essays investigate material and ideological environments as well as particular 'literary' texts. This *Companion* acknowledges lines of cultural force, surveys some of the fault-lines generated by seismic movements in fiscal policy, religion and politics, but does not treat of 'culture' as something analogous to a physical substance with consistent and enduring properties. No historicizing programme is followed, nor are crisis and contestation privileged over consensualism. Cultural generalizations in the period are likely to be invalidated by the way in which at this time, far more than now, that imagined com-

munity of 'Britain' was possessed of a plurality of discrete cultures, created by regional and political difference, rank, religion, gender or any combination of these.[15]

Some contributors would read from texts to cultural conditions, fewer would insist that particular material conditions determine rather than enable the texts that are the subjects of their chapters. Theatrical representations of the market, for example, sketched in texts as different as Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599), Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), are as implicated in a traditional 'moral economy' as they are patterned by contemporary economies, and are structured around patterns of festivity that reach back to both the Christian calendrical year and classical comedy. Some chapters seek to embed texts within early modern history and culture, others, particularly in the 'Readings' part, indicate how Renaissance texts might be read not only contextually but also from the perspectives of the theories and preconceptions of our own day. This needs no apology: we have long realised that, to tweak a familiar aspiration of Matthew Arnold, the endeavour to see a text as itself, 'as it really was', is impossible. All readings are mediated: by the irrecoverability of the past, by our membership of interpretative communities (is a work canonical or not, 'major' or minor?), as well as by preconceptions moulded by our own race, class and gender. 'Meanings' are created as much by readers as by writers.

Spelling in this volume, of quotations and, usually, titles, has been silently modernized. (Exceptions have been made when, for example, Spenser is cited or when modernization would obscure a semantic point.)

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Notes

1 See Bolgar.
2 See Lewis.
3 See Early Tudor Humanism, Epic, and Hill.
4 See Orgel and Strong and Court Drama and the Masque.
5 See Publication: Print and Manuscript.
6 See The Writing of Travel.
7 See Strong (1969).
8 See Diaries and Identity.
9 See Lanyer's 'The Description of Cookham' and Jonson's 'To Penshurst', Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Women and Drama, and Was There a Renaissance Feminism?
10 See The English Print, The Neglected Genres of Popular Verse and Local and 'Customary' Drama.
11 See Burckhardt, p. 81, and Scientific Writing.
12 See, however, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*,

Book V: Poetry, Politics, and Justice and Writing the Nation.

13 The mere thirteen instances of the word in the remainder of the Shakespearean canon often designate 'Brittany'.

14 See, however, Bray and Spink.

15 See, for example, Spufford (1974), Underdown and Trill.

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