

Contesting the Renaissance. By *William Caferro*. *Contesting the Past*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. viii + 253. \$84.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper).

The Renaissance leads a double life. In the academic world the term is highly problematic: at best, using it can render you unintelligible—so little does it suit some modern academic narratives—and at worst risks making you sound naive or politically incorrect, as the term is seen by some to exclude nonelite communities and artifacts. Yet the Renaissance lives a second, entirely trouble-free life in popular culture, where “a Renaissance man” is an accomplished, well-rounded male and where Donatello, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael are ninja turtles. The one place where these two lives coexist is in the classroom. In the classroom, students with no previous exposure to the nineteenth-century “fathers” of the Renaissance—Michelet, Burckhardt, and, for the English-speaking world, Symonds¹—will identify the period with notions such as the awakening of the human intellect, liberation from the “Age of Faith,” artistic genius, scientific and geographical “breakthroughs,” individualism, and, most important, the “emergence of modernity.” It will take weeks to demythologize and recontextualize such “knowledge”—and this includes restoring Michelet’s and Burckhardt’s original understandings, often distorted by subsequent phases of revision. If, by the end of the course, the same students are aware of the complexities of the Renaissance as a historical construct and are reluctant to offer a one-line definition of it, proposing instead a series of more or less contradictory formulations, it means their lecturer has done an excellent job. And that is precisely what William Caferro has done in *Contesting the Renaissance*: he has provided an excellent, introductory, yet nuanced picture of what is often represented using overly simple labels, both within and outside academe.

Aside from the book’s slightly misleading title, however, Caferro—an economic historian whose research focuses on medieval and Renaissance Italy—does not really contest the Renaissance as an historical term of art *in propria persona*. If anything, it is the much more broadly accepted “early modern” label that he is critical of, particularly its teleological overtones. Rather, he offers nonspecialists a wide-ranging synthesis of the major debates over the meanings and uses of the term “Renaissance” since its introduction.

The historiographical literature Caferro synthesizes is not only vast but also highly controversial. Despite the success of Michelet’s, Burckhardt’s, and Symonds’s works, the Renaissance had already been identified as a problematic concept by the first decade of the twentieth century (7), and was already being destabilized by the Revolt of the Medievalists in the 1910s. The nineteenth-century paradigm of the Renaissance flourished anew in the English-speaking academic world of the 1930s and 1940s, only to be diagnosed as “on the point of collapse” in the late 1970s (18). Yet, each rebuttal of what Wallace Ferguson called the “most intractable problem child of historiography” (13) has sparked more, rather than less, research, and it has widened, rather than narrowed, the margins of the field.

Caferro has organized this material in seven chapters, starting with a general discussion of “The Renaissance Question” and proceeding to analyze some of the central themes of the scholarly debate: individualism (“Who Was the Renaissance Man?”), gender (“Who Was the Renaissance Woman?”), humanism (“Renovation or Innovation? Transmission or Reception?”), economy (“Hard Times or Prosperity?”),

¹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, vol. 7, *Renaissance* (Paris, 1855); J. Burckhardt, *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Basel, 1860); J. A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1875).

politics (“The Emergence of the Modern State?”), and faith and science (“Religious or Rational?”). The book ends with a select bibliography of further readings and a helpful index of names, places, and key terms and topics.

The chapters are well balanced in length and follow a clear structure: each starts with a quotation from a famous Renaissance text, proceeds with a careful restatement of the Burckhardian interpretation, then analyzes subsequent revisions of Burckhardt, concluding with the current state of the debate and research trends. The chronological progression from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the present and the organization in terms of arguments followed by counterarguments across national boundaries and cultural trends are consistent throughout the book, making it easy for the readers to orient themselves.

Caferro has a balanced approach to his sources, both old and new, but that does not prevent him from establishing his own voice and personal perspective as a scholar involved in the debates he discusses, which makes the book all the more enjoyable to read. His prose is engaging and his language accessible to the nonspecialist (except perhaps for the expression “conspicuous consumption,” which may baffle some readers).

Yet no book is perfect, and despite its many merits *Contesting the Renaissance* is no exception. The absence of a chapter on the arts is a major, and rather astonishing, omission. It is difficult to think of a good reason for such a void in the historiographical journey Caferro has laid out for his readers, for not only were the arts central to the creation of the Renaissance as a historical construct—and perhaps we need reminding that Burckhardt himself was a professor of art history—but they have also been at the core of all subsequent debates, systematically serving as a touchstone for the validity of the construct in other fields of inquiry. For instance, when synthesizing Brian Copenhaver’s skeptical opinion with regard to the validity of the notion of “Renaissance science,” Caferro writes that the scholar “noted that for all the work of humanists, technicians, and philosophers the period saw no unique set of concepts and theories, no achievements in science that were comparable to those in the fields of arts and letters” (204). Nor can the arts be justifiably excluded from this synthesis as a field where the Renaissance has gone uncontested. Historians of the arts have been as critical of the period concept as their colleagues from other fields—in fact, the current folding of the Renaissance into the early modern period has been championed most powerfully by academic literary critics—and they have been as sensitive to the opportunities for thematic and methodological cross-fertilizations with social history, anthropology, gender studies, and so on, as their peers in history. Questionable too are the limiting of “further bibliography” to English titles (a German title, 220, provides the lone exception) and the overemphasis on the scholarship of the Anglo-American world. This is partially due to the pedagogical goals of the book (as Caferro underlines, 213), but graduate students and scholars in other fields, surely, would welcome a more balanced list, comprehensive of non-English historiography and criticism. A few fundamental titles published recently in the United States are also missing, such as Lodi Nauta’s revolutionary study of Lorenzo Valla’s philosophy and Thomas Robisheaux’s innovative book on witchcraft.² Finally, the book’s editing is not always up to standard: for example, on 217, Anthony Pagden’s work is attributed to John Jeffries Martin and vice versa, and on 167, notes 50 and 51 refer to the wrong texts.

² L. Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2009); T. W. Robisheaux, *The Last Witch of Lagenburg: Murder in a German Village* (New York, 2009).

Despite its defects, however, *Contesting the Renaissance* remains an extremely valuable reference text that will naturally find its place in both graduate and undergraduate reading lists and that will help students at all levels orient themselves in the *mare magnum* of Renaissance controversies.

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Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World, 1600–1800. Edited by

Gabriel Piterberg, Teofilo F. Ruiz, and Geoffrey Symcox.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press (in association with the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library), 2010. Pp. viii+281. Can\$65.00.

Over the past decade, there have been several reconsiderations of Fernand Braudel's monumental contribution to the historical profession and to conceptions of Mediterranean history. The publication of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (Oxford, 2000) sparked a renewed wave of interest in the Mediterranean that resulted in numerous conferences and several edited volumes of essays. One of Horden and Purcell's most influential configurations has been their distinction between "history of the Mediterranean," that is, of the sea as a whole, and "history in the Mediterranean," which focuses on particular parts of the region. Braudel's masterwork, *La Méditerranée*, was of course a "history of" the region; one of the fundamental difficulties collections of essays that consider Braudel's work must confront is that the form favors "history in" the Mediterranean. The editors of *Braudel Revisited* acknowledge this tension, pointing out that Braudel's work has been indirect in its influence rather than a model for other scholars to follow.

The essays in this collection originated at a series of four conferences held at the Clark Library in Los Angeles in 2002–3. The conferences aimed to assess Braudel's influence on a particular area of historical practice, asking how his work "has weathered the paradigm shift from social history, of which Braudel was a pioneer, to the current mode of cultural history, whose concerns and methods are very different" (4). The essays selected for the volume vary widely in tone and purpose, but they are united in their focus on cultural history within the Mediterranean region. The majority of the eleven essays are from historians, with one literary scholar (Carroll Johnson) and one musicologist (Gary Tomlinson) represented. Given the volume's focus on the cultural life of the Mediterranean, a contribution from an art or architectural historian would have rounded out the offerings from a disciplinary perspective.

The volume's editors have divided the essays into two sections; the first part, "Thinking with Braudel," is intended to reconsider Braudel's text itself and particularly Braudel's approach to Mediterranean culture. Lucette Valensi's opening essay analyzes Braudel's singular approach to description and emotion, two of the essential tools of the cultural historian. She finds that unlike most of his contemporaries, Braudel established his own intellectual identity at the outset of his work, an approach that carried over into his descriptions of the region itself. She notes that Braudel's use of his own perspective on the sea meant that he "dispossessed the people he studied from their dreams, their fears, their expectations, and their beliefs, silenced their voices, and played as a soloist" (31). Geoffrey Symcox examines Braudel's often-noted neglect of the cultural life of cities, pointing out that between the 1949 and the 1966 editions Braudel added over