

'The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: Their Poems and Their Contexts'

by Steven W. May, (Pegasus Press, 1999)

Book Review by Tom Veal

In popular imagination, Queen Elizabeth's court was a highly literary venue, where any nobleman might at any time have a sonnet up his sleeve and the pen was as potent a weapon as the sword.

Professor May explores the more complex truth in this study of the poetic and dramatic works of the upper crust of Elizabethan society. He limits his purview to the men and women properly called "courtiers", those who had access to the Queen's privy chamber and might rightly consider themselves her intimates, if not her friends. These aristocrats moved in a world far above that of court hangers-on like Edmund Spenser and John Lyly, not to mention the run of out-of-court Shakespeares, Marlowes, Marstons, Draytons, Chapmans, Jonsons and the like, who glimpsed the great ones only when and if specially summoned to perform a play or provide the text of a masque.

The book comprises two parts: a narrative account of courtier literary development and an anthology of over 90 courtier poems, most of them not readily accessible anywhere else.

The narrative begins in the last days of Henry VIII, when verse, unless in Latin and devoted to suitably serious subjects, lay under a cloud. Elizabeth's private attitude was more tolerant - she liked poetry and had begun writing it before her accession - but condemnation of frivolous versifying continued to be dominant during the first two decades of her reign.

Professor May credits two young writers of the 1570's, the Earl of Oxford and Sir Edward Dyer, with introducing English, secular, amatory verse to the court. Neither was a great poet. Their works retain the sing-song meters, intrusive alliteration and commonplace sensibility of "Drab Age" poetics. They did, however, show the way for more talented and original figures. While the number of courtier poets was never large, their ranks included two major lights of English literature, Sir John Harington and Sir Philip Sidney, and others - Raleigh, Greville, Robert Sidney, Essex, the Queen herself, etc. - whose output is worthy of survival.

Elizabethan Courtier Poets surveys the principal poetic works of the courtier group, the motives for their composition (with special attention to the role of verse in the competition for the Queen's favor) and the ways in which courtly litterateurs influenced or failed to influence both one another and out-of-court poets. The analysis is more historical and biographical than literary, which is in a way unsatisfying but has the happy corollary of being untouched by Modern Critical Theory.

The second part of the book, the anthology, lists every person who meets Professor May's criteria for classification as a "courtier poet" and summarizes the supporting data. The pertinent facts - on the order of who exchanged New Year's presents with the Queen in what years - are often far from fascinating, but there is interesting incidental information. How many of the "Oxford was Shakespeare" partisans who place exaggerated emphasis on the Earl's educational attainments are aware that his degrees from Oxford and Cambridge were strictly honorary, two among the dozens handed out to royal attendants when Elizabeth visited those institutions?

The poems included in the anthology are not intended to be either the best examples of courtier verse or a cross-section of the whole. Professor May has instead concentrated on furnishing reliable texts of works that are otherwise hard to find. Some are poetically very slight, such as the inscription that Lord Burghley wrote to accompany the gift of a spinning wheel to his daughter. Others display unexpected merit. The Earl of Essex, in particular, writing under sentence of death, is powerful and eloquent. 'Tis pity, one thinks, that he did not forsake politics for poetry.

For any serious student of Elizabethan literary life, this book is an essential text. Those whose interest is real but more casual will also find it rewarding for its insights into an important segment of the greatest era of English poetry.