

Wit's Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics. Stephen Orgel.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. xxiv + 192 pp. \$39.95.

Orgel's main title is the subtitle of Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* (1598), a book now mainly remembered for its "Comparative Discourse of Our English Poets with the Greeke, Latine, and Italian Poets." The comparing itself is superficial stuff, but it generates an amiably fast paced and informative catalogue of English literature as it looked to an enthusiast at the end of the sixteenth century. That catalogue is regularly cited by modern scholars, usually in passing; Orgel shows Meres a bit more respect, pausing long enough to note how his title—which translates as *The Treasure House of Pallas Athena*—is a mythic encryption of his subtitle, and suggesting that a further elegant pun is involved: *Athena's Thames*. Orgel also pays Meres the homage of aligning his own "project" with his predecessor's "assumption that the way to praise contemporary English literature was by comparing it with that of Greece and Rome" (1), though Orgel's agenda goes beyond "praise," and also beyond literature to a wider range of European high culture.

The result could have been a very long book, but it is instead a gracefully short one. There are some recurring tendencies in its arguments. Orgel deemphasizes, for instance, the role of the original languages—"the extent of Latin literacy in early modern England, even among the educated, has been greatly overstated" (39)—and, following Meres's example, regularly includes contemporary Italian sources along with Latin and Greek ones in the category *classical*. Orgel is also alert in a relaxed way to the inherent paradoxes of his topic: "though the Italians must have known that the statues they were digging up had the remains of pigment on them, nobody ever proposed painting the David to look lifelike—the rebirth of the classical was always revisionary" (57). An important point, obviously, but so efficiently and lucidly made that it needs none of the further fussing which someone else might have gotten into before moving on, as Orgel almost always does. No single thesis gets seriously pursued across the various chapters.

Orgel's attention, rather, devolves onto a variety of topics as his interest and expertise lead him, such as (an incomplete list): translations of classical poetry, especially the *Aeneid*, and the slow emergence of the pentameter couplet as "the sound of classical" in English verse; the gradual replacement of Gothic by roman type on the printed page (in Mark Bland's characterization, "the definitive triumph of white over black" [101]); the fascinating evolution of the printed title page (in one early Italian example an artfully decorative border surrounds a table of contents versified as a caudate sonnet); the role of the Arundel family in introducing Continental tastes in (more or less) classicizing art into England, especially into the household of King James's son Henry, whose collection passed at his own death to the future King Charles. A net is being cast here over the *longue durée* of Orgel's career. The discussion of the Arundels' collection leads back to one of their own key influencers, Inigo Jones, for several detailed



pages supplementing Orgel's own pathbreaking scholarship on Jones and his work. In places—as on the question of plagiarism (with an unexpected *peroratio* into the present day), or the illustrations in Caxton's edition of *The Canterbury Tales*—Orgel summarizes longer discussions he has already published elsewhere.

There is a generous, well-chosen gathering of illustrations, intelligently placed in the text where the reader needs them, and the book is in general quite handsomely turned out. The elegance does seem to come with a certain inattentiveness. Theognis becomes Theogonis (as in *Theogony?*), both in the main text and the index (148, 191). A chapter entitled “The Uses of Prosody” has almost nothing to say about prosody but accommodates several pages on Arthur Golding's (unversified) translation of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. A note to the following chapter, which does discuss prosody, comments on Virgil's handling of “anapaestic hexameter” (169). Not a meter I remember meeting with before, but maybe: “Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature was stirring”?

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