

Humanist Warriors

Susanna de Beer's New Book on the Battle for Rome

Review of: Susanna de Beer, *The Renaissance Battle for Rome. Competing Claims to an Idealized Past in Humanist Latin Poetry*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, 262 pp., ISBN: 9780198878902, £ 80.00.

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At the end of the fourth book of the epic poem *Hesperis* (Hesp. 4,495-610) by Basinio da Parma (1425-57), the hero of the poem, Sigismondo Malatesta, visits Rome to speak with Pope Eugene IV. After the negotiations, the hero takes a walk through the city: he visits various monuments and reflects on the true glory that only literature can bring. This brief episode contains numerous motifs repeatedly associated with Rome in humanist poetry: the claim to power of the Pope residing in Rome, the guarantor of an empire that was predicted to be eternal and a place with significant ruins that prompt reflections on how eternal fame can be acquired.

Passages such as this one from the *Hesperis* are extremely common and vary in detail in Neo-Latin literature. The book to be discussed here by Susanna de Beer makes it possible to understand and embed such passages and their individual aspects in their respective contexts: The 'idea of Rome' was so powerful and charged in (Italian) humanism that numerous authors seized upon it, writing either for or against Rome, whether as insiders (in Rome) or outsiders, affirming or bitterly criticizing Rome. This led to a veritable literary battle, a 'battle for Rome'. De Beer skillfully presents an overview of this often confusing battlefield. After a general introduction in which she develops the main thesis, the individual chapters are devoted to specific motifs and ideas that were invoked in favor of or against Rome. These are always complex motifs and images used affirmatively or negatively (as counter-images). De Beer succeeds very well in presenting this complex situation.

In the *Introduction* (1-23), de Beer describes her main thesis: the book explores how, in the (early Italian) Renaissance, various people or groups tried to claim the 'idea of Rome' for themselves to strengthen their own position. Since in this period of highly charged intellectual debates, where classical antiquity played a major role,

many authors tried to appropriate Rome, de Beer speaks of a veritable ‘battle for Rome’. Although this phenomenon began in antiquity and can still be observed long after the Renaissance, she justifies her focus on the early Renaissance by noting that Rome occupied a special position in the discourse of this period; thus, texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are primarily discussed. De Beer’s aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of this struggle based on humanist poetry (though the focus on poetry is less well justified). The discourse analysis employs concepts of insiders vs. outsiders, i.e., people in Rome versus those attacking Rome from the outside; image and counter-image, as developed in imagology; and reception studies, which shows how humanists not only seized material but also literary forms and concepts from antiquity.

The first thematic chapter (24-54) uses texts by Petrarch, Jean d’Hesdin, Hildebert de Lavardin, Celio Calcagnini, Janus Vitalis, Joachim du Bellay, Andrea Fulvio, and Erasmus to present how Petrarch promoted the idea of Rome’s rebirth and how this idea was taken up in various ways, as *renovatio Romae* or as *renovatio studii*, depending on whether the author (as an insider) adopted a Roman perspective or (as an outsider) a critical perspective of contemporary Rome. Essentially, these texts lay the foundation for the ‘battle for Rome’ phenomenon.

In ‘Competing Appropriations of Rome’s Empire without End’ (55-90), de Beer shows how various founding narratives given in Virgil’s *Aeneid* were adopted by humanists to make places or personalities outside Rome legitimate successors of Rome: one could imitate the situation in the first book of the *Aeneid*, in which Jupiter prophesies an *imperium sine fine* for the Romans to his daughter Venus, establish a direct link to Aeneas (and thus to Troy) or to Romulus (and thus to the foundation of Rome), or even to Augustus, celebrated as the first ruler under whom a Golden Age broke out again. For all these connections, it was not necessary to be directly in Rome. The pope and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire are named as the main representatives of this appropriation; it would have been nice to see an example even further away from Rome.

The following chapter (91-131) shows how Rome could become a collective term for virtue or vice: *virtus Romana* stands for all the achievements of humanity that could be continued from paganism into Christianity; Rome can also be described as a rallying point for all vices, as a place that has moved far away from its virtuous origins. Once again, the perspective and the intended effect determine which position an author adopts here.

‘The Symbolic Resonances of Rome’s Cityscape’ (132-174) takes as its starting point the ruins that were clearly visible in Renaissance Rome and became the occasion for numerous (poetic) texts: they were hooks for the praise of Rome’s greatness but also for the realization that nothing great exists forever; thus, they could be used both by authors who wanted to celebrate Rome from an insider’s perspective and for those who criticized Rome from the outside.

The last chapter (175-210) sheds light on the close relationship between Rome and the Latin language and literature. For the humanists, writing in Latin meant inscribing themselves in the idea of Rome; at the same time, writing about Rome ensured its survival, because texts are more enduring than monuments, as Horace already knew. Rome here becomes the great metaphor of humanist writing in general.

Although the book is rather slim at 212 pages, de Beer has succeeded in providing a very broad and satisfying overview of a phenomenon that was omnipresent in intellectual discourse in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She has provided us with a practical tool for better categorizing many other passages (such as the passage from Basinio quoted at the beginning) in their historical context. De Beer always relates these motifs to classical models and pretexts. It should be noted that the

authors she quotes mostly reflect our modern canon of classics. It would have been good to include popular authors such as Claudian, who was an important model for humanist writers in the fifteenth century. Many fifteenth-century humanists learned from Claudian in particular how to adapt classical texts such as the *Aeneid* or the *Metamorphoses* for their own (panegyric) purposes. But especially considering that this book will be used first to better understand many additional passages about Rome that are not mentioned, this minor point of criticism is not significant.