

John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2004; pp.187; RRP £52.00; ISBN: 9780333643082.

It is a commonplace to regard the so-called 'rise of the individual' as one of the developments characterising the transition from the medieval to the modern world. Feudal societies, so the story goes, entertained no concept of individual identity; every person had a place and a role determined by God, and it was for the good of the entire community that every person conform to expectations. In modern (Western, liberal, democratic) societies, individual freedom has come to be privileged over social uniformity and individuals are autonomous, self-assertive and free to choose a life of their own making. Somewhere in the middle, a momentous shift occurred. It was during the Renaissance that people suddenly began to awaken from their medieval stupor, to recognise and fulfil their individual potential.

While this narrative is now widely rejected, there can be little argument that, politically, the value and agency of the individual has changed considerably. But what exactly was the nature of the change that occurred and how is it to be measured? It is self-evident that throughout history every person was recognised as a distinct individual by friends and family, but it is much harder to accept that the experience of interiority, or subjectivity, itself has a history. Individualism, as John Martin has called it here, is a fascinating subject, and Martin's 'exploration of the ways in which Renaissance men and women experienced and understood the relation of inwardness or interiority to the equally vast social, political, cultural, and religious worlds outside themselves' (p.ix) is a welcome addition to the scholarship on it.

For Martin, the Renaissance conception of identity was 'radically different from our own' (p.x), but modern scholars still assume some basic human commonalities. Consequently, a number of 'myths' have emerged about just what it is that individual identity comprises. With *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, Martin attempts to dispel some of these, beginning with his dismissal of the two currently dominant models for conceptualising identity – a post-modern fragmented self, described by Stephen Greenblatt, and a modernist self, an independent, assertive, confident agent, identified by Jacob Burckhardt – as 'hopelessly teleological' (p.8).

In Martin's model of individualism, identity is seen as relational, but it is more complex than just identifying the (shifting) line between interior private self and socially constructed public self. Indeed, it is 'misleading' to think in terms of an internal and an external self that can be separately identified (p.7). The problem of identity lies in the space between interior self and socially constructed self. Martin adds extra dimensions to his model by proposing that the Renaissance 'self' can be conceptualised in five different ways: the conforming, the prudential, the performing, the porous, and the sincere. Renaissance individuals negotiated an 'identity' through each of these different modes.

Any theory to do with the human psyche is always going to be largely speculative, but in this study Martin also deals with the thorny problem of accessing something so personal and elusive. Drawing on case studies from the archives of the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition, and an impressive list of other contemporary sources, Martin discovers that 'Renaissance texts ... are filled with efforts to make sense' of the relation between interior and exterior self (p.16). After decades pondering these issues, he has developed sensitive and effective reading strategies that have produced some intriguing results.

Despite this, the reader is left with some unsolved puzzles. The historicity of individualism remains somewhat obscure. Martin argues that what makes the Renaissance period different is the emergence of an 'ethical field' (p.118). He identifies a tension between the prudential self and the sincere self and asserts that '[i]t was only such a self (an individual and expressive subject) that could be called upon ... to choose whether to project a faithful representation of its concerns, its feelings, its beliefs to the outside world or whether to hold them in check, concealing them' (p.117). Surely, though individuals at all times have been faced with a similar kind of negotiation? Can Martin's insights about individualism be applied to the study of people living in both earlier and later periods? Furthermore, should we still regard the Renaissance as the moment of the significant turning point?

Editorially, an unacceptably high number of typos (I counted at least ten) proved a distraction to this reviewer, as did the number of sentences beginning with 'And', though admittedly this may be purely a matter of stylistic taste. More problematically perhaps, the early chapters are somewhat marred by the repetition of examples and a tendency to labour the argument. The suspicion that separate works have been combined and not quite completely streamlined is confirmed by the acknowledgements to other

publishers for the re-use of work. An example of this repetition: an explanation of the figure of Nicodemus, who came to 'Jesus 'by night'', first appears on p.35 and is then repeated on p.47, in the following chapter. The explanation of minor points twice within a few pages, might lead us to wonder if the substance of this text is just as slim as the volume. Ultimately, however, this study proves to be more than satisfying. While his premise may be quite narrow, Martin manages to cover considerable ground and offers some surprising and exciting insights.

Martin's discussion of the concept of individual identity in relation to exorcism and witchcraft, in the chapter entitled 'Possession', is of particular interest. His primary thesis – that the experience of self in the Renaissance was 'a dialogue between what was perceived as interior and what exterior – made the surface of the body (its self-enveloping membrane of skin) a site of the age's most unsettling anxieties about identity' (p.100), explains the contemporary belief in the possibility of demonic possession. Equally intriguing is Martin's contention that the Renaissance period witnessed a shift away from the medieval belief that men and women were merely 'creatures' of God, in terms of their interiors merely His reflections, to a new paradigm that allowed for the recognition of different individuals. It is this attempt to discern and explain the principles at work for contemporaries – whether they were conscious of them or not – that makes *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* conceptually and methodologically important. It is by no means the definitive text on the subject, but offers an original platform from which further discussion and research can spring.

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