

Reviews

Masterless Men

The Elizabethan Underworld

by Gamini Salgado. St. Martin's Press, 1993

Reviewed by Warren Hope. Dr. Hope is author of The Shakespeare Controversy (McFarland, 1992).

Salgado's main interest is biographical—and no wonder. He is able to survey a hurly-burly of human types in outlandish and cunning situations. The result is a charming book, full of incident and anecdote, that at once entertains and informs. Beside that, the book is beautifully produced and illustrated, making it a pleasure to look at as well as to read. Still, the treatment is not completely satisfying because it lacks an organizing principle.

The characters in Salgado's book, from Gamaliel Ratsey, the Robin Hood-like highwayman, to Moll Cutpurse, the "notorious baggage that used to go in men's apparel," are not merely fascinating specimens in a human menagerie but witnesses to the disintegration of one way of life and the birth of another. This fact provides the organizing principle that could have made this book more enlightening without rendering it any less entertaining.

The Tudor period is marked by the rise of a new ruling class, the "new men" who came to power through service to the state, that is, political conniving, rather than through birth. Wealth as well as power shifted from the hands of the old nobility and the Roman Catholic Church to these climbers. Too often, these shifts are thought of as limited to the top of the social heap, as if they took place over the heads of a silent, stable, and unchanging mass. Salgado's text serves to remind us that nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that masses were set loose from their fixed positions by this shift. They became "masterless men," and these masses, trying to fend for themselves, gave rise to not only rogues and vagrants, peddlars and prostitutes, but also a new literature, new religions, and a new outlook on the world and humanity's life on it.

Two primary factors seem to be responsible for this state of affairs: first, the breakdown of the feudal system, and second, the rise of the printing press. Salgado provides us with signs of the breakdown of feudalism. He writes that under Henry VII private armies were abolished, turning trained and armed men loose in society with no way to earn a living and no lord to whom they owed allegiance. They became free lances, necessarily, organizing themselves often in a caricature of the dominant society, with a Lord of the gang, a host of

Hope

positions and roles, and ceremonies and customs that served to provide them with a sense of order. These gangs, not unlike the condottieri earlier in Italy, were outlaws by definition, as it were—they had been placed outside the closed, legal society by a change in that society. Highwaymen on the roads of England and bragging soldiers on the Elizabethan stage—finding their fullest and ripest expression in Falstaff—can be traced directly to the abolition of the private armies.

Similarly, tenants who once were tied to the soil owned by a lord or the church were forced to become day laborers, working for wages rather than for food and other necessities directly. These farm laborers were turned off the land to go on the road in search of work, masterless, without a defined place in the society at large. In order to travel in search of work they had to break the law. Formerly, they were bound to the land and needed to obtain a passport to legally travel from county to county. Now they were forced to forge or illegally obtain passports in order to pursue their wages. Beggars, vagrants, prostitutes, and conny-catching con men arose directly from this forcing of honest laborers into an extra-legal position. Finally, the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s did not simply represent a transfer of wealth, but also created a social vacuum. The charity of the monasteries disappeared, increasing the number of traveling impoverished in the land, and the Catholic customs that served to hold society together were severed or altered.

Salgado gives a clear instance of these changes, in terms of both real estate and the immaterial wealth of custom, in Bartholomew's fair, the subject of one of Ben Jonson's greatest dramatic comedies. St. Bartholomew's hospital had been established in the 12th Century by monks, and its annual fair provided a marketplace for the people and revenues for the monks. In 1539, the monastery was suppressed and sold to Sir Richard Rich. Sir Richard continued the custom of the annual fair and his descendants collected rents for booths and stalls and arranged for the mayor and aldermen of London to open the fair with secular ceremonies rather than the rites of the monks. Gulls from the country and conny-catchers mixed at the fair, making cash the connection that had once been based on blood and religion. Adam, the old man in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, by choosing to stay with Orlando his young master, displays a loyalty—a feudal virtue—that is already old-fashioned in a world that has replaced loyalty with shrewdness.

Salgado uses as his primary sources the pamphlets of the University Wits—John Lyly, Thomas Nashe, and especially Robert Green. These men came to London as free lances, too, literary equivalents of the soldiers loosed by the abolition of private armies. Decades earlier they would have undoubtedly become priests, like the first poet laureate, John Skelton, or scholars housed and cared for by members of the nobility. Instead, thanks to the rise of the printing

The Elizabethan Review

press, they set up as masterless men who kept life and limb together by the exercise of their wits—selling pamphlets to the printers and booksellers, plays to the players in the new public theaters, and cadging gifts from noble patrons with dedications. The result was a secularization of literature and the development of a new prose style. These writers depicted the actual life around them, the life they took in with their senses, and portrayed that life in a style that combined the thought and Latinisms of the scholars and clergymen of the recent past, the plots and canting jargon of highwaymen, con men, and pickpockets, and the actual speech of the London streets. Nashe calls across the centuries to Gabriel Harvey with this wonderful phrase on his friend, Robert Green, “Hark in your ear, he had a good cloak of a grave, gooseturd green.” This living language, used for ostensibly moral purposes by giving sound advice to travelers to London and others, marks the beginning of the English novel, stories written for a large middle-class audience, a public audience, rather than a small coterie of nobles and their hangers-on who circulated their sonnets in private. Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana* evolved from the pamphlets of the University Wits as surely as Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* depicts the depopulation of the countryside that was the logical result of the breakdown of the feudal way of life and the enclosure of the commons.

What marks the Elizabethan underworld is economic necessity in combination with an enforced and often unsought liberty. This combination ensured that energy and ingenuity would become respected traits. When the dust raised by the collapse of feudalism and the Roman Catholic Church in England settled, these new virtues found expression in the American Declaration of Independence. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness emerged as a way of life in a new world peopled initially by the new men of the lower levels of Elizabethan society. The once feared and despised condition of being masterless became the hope and aspiration of each democratic individual. It is this story that gives Salgado’s human menagerie its true meaning and importance.