

Williams (G. D.) *Pietro Bembo on Etna. The Ascent of a Venetian Humanist*. Pp. 440, illus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardback, £41.99, US\$65.00. ISBN 978-0-19-027229-6.

The briefest glimpse of Pietro Bembo's prose – so ably translated by Williams in the edition provided at the conclusion of the volume under review – gives a sense of the irrepressible youth who climbed Mount Etna in 1493, and of the range of his many scholarly enthusiasms. The young author of *De Aetna* – a father-son dialogue ranging up the wondrous slopes of Etna and into the depths of naturalistic explanations of its phenomena – would go on to become official historian of Venice, librarian of St Mark's Basilica, and a prominent cardinal. He would also publish widely, including works which would ultimately shape the form of the Italian madrigal, and indulge in love affairs with powerful and cultured women such as Lucrezia Borgia and Isabella d'Este. As Williams so ably draws out, Bembo's colourful and eventful life also saw him engaging with key developments in humanism, the identity of the Venetian patriciate and the culture of Quattrocento Venice, not to mention early modern printing.

The Aldine Press therefore plays a significant supporting role in the narrative laid out by Williams. Founded in Venice in 1494 by Aldus Manutius, the press inaugurated what might be termed the second stage in the development of European printing. The Gutenberg Bible, printed between 1450 and 1455, marked the first major project to be printed using movable metal type, but both it and the incunables which followed generally sought to imitate the design and layout of lavish manuscript works. The Aldine Press, by contrast, was the first to produce volumes in the portable, octavo format, and the first to cut an 'italic', handwriting-style typeface, as opposed to the traditional, calligraphic-style black-letter fount. Although from a design standpoint Pietro Bembo had no hand in these developments, both he and his *De Aetna* are irrevocably linked with the development of new humanist typefaces: his 1495 account was the first to be published using a new and, at the time, visually fresh 'roman' (an upright fount, such as this review is printed in) face cut for Manutius by Francesco Griffo. Such was the quality of Griffo's design that it was revived by the Monotype Corporation in the late 1920s; and such was the legacy of the Venetian cardinal whose work it first adorned that the typeface thus created was named 'Bembo'. This face has since been digitised, and in its lead form can still be found in the type-cases of letterpress printers around the world.

The extent to which the novelty of the Aldine typeface can be read as an analogy for the young Bembo, and the behaviour and ideas revealed in his *De Aetna*, marks an important theme within Williams' volume, but it is nevertheless one of several. The volume opens not with the printed context of Bembo's volcanic narrative, but rather with its deep intellectual roots, as Williams traces the identity and development of 'the Etna idea' in classical literature. Surveying the writings of Pindar (*Pythian* 1), Virgil (*Aeneid* 3), Lucretius (*De rerum natura* 1 and 6), Seneca (*Letter* 79), and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 5 and 15), regarding the volcano – alongside, of course, the anonymous (pseudo-Virgillian) first-century *Aetna* poem – Williams demonstrates that Mount Etna has variously been mythologised, de-mythologised, and re-mythologised throughout its career within the Greco-Roman literary tradition. The

Etna Idea, therefore, is characterised by a ‘doubleness of perspectives’, clearly evidenced in Bembo’s text, which simultaneously acknowledges the mythological memories associated with the volcano, whilst also coolly enquiring into the natural causes of its remarkable phenomena. Williams’ careful explication of the Etna idea – complete with generous, and translated, samples of its Greek and Latin sources – is a highlight of the volume, and sure to become an important resource for any student or scholar of classical thought on volcanoes.

The second chapter considers the multiple contexts of travel literature within which *De Aetna* was written and against which it might be read: the traditions of antiquarian travel which preceded him, the elephant in the room of Petrarch’s famous account of ascending Mont Ventoux, and the broader, modern narratives of the history of mountaineering (which have generally dismissed pre-modern interactions with mountains as rooted solely in fear and distaste). Williams is laudably careful, however, not to push any comparison with modern experience too far, and the third and fourth chapters delve into the details of Bembo’s education and the peers and teachers whose ideas and interests shaped his own intellectual – and physical – journey to Etna. The fourth chapter also considers the Venetian, patrician context of Bembo’s upbringing, and in so doing highlights the tension evident in *De Aetna* between the demands of state, characterised by the dedicated and harried person of Bernardino Bembo, and the desire for *otium*, represented by the youthful Pietro and necessary for the full pursuit of intellectual endeavours.

The final three chapters consider – in markedly different ways – the connections between Bembo’s text and the physical realities external to it. The fifth chapter – incorporating a succinct and readable history of the Aldine Press – offers a persuasive argument for the ‘interrelationship of physical form and textual meaning’ (p. 199), both in Aldine productions in general and in *De Aetna* in particular, with the roman typeface, ‘so fresh and adventurous in print design’ being ‘symbolically meaningful in a work that tells of youthful adventure and (self-)exploration on Etna’s slopes’ (p.202). This issue of self-exploration is continued in the sixth chapter, which considers the multiple landscapes – and not just those of Etna – which form Bembo’s presentation both of his volcanic journey and of himself. The most significant of these are Noniano – the tranquil garden and family home in which the father-son dialogue is located – and Venice, which simultaneously intrudes into Bembo’s narrative in the form of his father’s continuing concern with affairs of state, and yet is also overwhelmed by the irrepressible, wild nature of Etna, with which Pietro also repeatedly repulses his father’s phlegmatic attempts to explain away the wonder of the volcano. As such, Williams argues that the duality of the Etna idea – just like the Aldine font – also becomes a portrait of Bembo. The final chapter takes this concept of self-representation to its literal conclusion, considering the collection of art and antiquities formed by Bembo as a conscious act of familial memorialisation, and analysing in particular the images within the collection which are known to be or may be claimed to be portraits of Pietro.

Appropriately enough, however, it is Pietro Bembo who is given the last word, with the volume closing with a dual-language edition of *De Aetna* newly-translated by Williams. This is not the first English translation of *De Etna* – the 2005 *I Tatti* edition by Mary P. Chatfield provides the text alongside translations of Bembo’s lyric poetry – but, if the preceding monograph can be read as its critical apparatus, it is certainly

the one with the most comprehensive introduction. The inclusion of the translated text raises the volume from the status of important and fascinating monograph to an indispensable reference work.

It is unusual but, in this case, necessary to discuss the volume under review as a material object. Although not quite an Aldine octavo – this would be a high bar for a reasonably-priced modern hardback monograph – the volume has clearly been produced with a close and fitting attention to the presentation of the text which it contains. The design of the bordered title-page (although perhaps more evocative of fine printing of the early twentieth century than of the late fifteenth) is a pleasing touch, whilst the setting of the text in Bembo (which is signalled to readers who may not be experts in typeface by way of a note on the final printed page) is a delightfully apt and evocative touch.

In both presentation and content, then, *Pietro Bembo on Etna* is a volume that deserves whole-hearted recommendation. Williams demonstrates a magisterial command of a wide range of scholarly concerns, from the history of mountaineering to the complex political and scholarly landscape of Quattrocento Venice. Set against this broad backdrop of interests, the volume is also clearly rooted in a deep and confident command of the extensive and multi-lingual literature concerning Pietro Bembo in particular. Part-biography, part-critical edition, interspersed with surveys of art, printing, and classical volcanic literature, this volume is sure to become a well-thumbed reference for students and researchers across a range of fields.

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