

for enclosed seas for themselves in the Baltic, with general advocacy of trading and shipping rights for neutrals nonetheless. The result is a gem of erudite reflection and argumentation, undeniably of interest to historians of international thought, intellectual history, international law, and the era in question.

Daniel M. Green, *University of Delaware*

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Before Enlightenment: Play and Illusion in Renaissance Humanism.

Timothy Kircher.

Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 326. Leiden: Brill, 2021. x + 294 pp. €108.

The concept of human activity and discourse as a *Theatrum Mundi* richly resonated in Renaissance culture. Timothy Kircher has pursued and elaborated on this idea in a book that makes the argument that humanist philosophy follows this metaphor in a profound way, and consequently challenges Paul O. Kristeller's remark that humanism made only modest contributions to philosophy as a discipline. For Kircher, the medium is, in effect, the message, in which dialogue offered particularly substantial and sophisticated insights into the human condition and rational mind. This was true both in closed dialogue, in which the intent of the discussion is made manifest by one of the interlocutors, and more so in open dialogue, in which no clearly formulated message is revealed, whereas many interpretations of a subject are rehearsed through wordplay and contrasting perspectives spoken by various characters.

This also appears in genres other than the dialogue. The play of language itself is a highly evolved humanist skill, which identifies both the reader and the creator of literature as *homo ludens*, using the accumulation of knowledge, skill in writing, and a desire to reveal what is good and true as a kind of epistemological game, the purpose of which is serious and whose development assumes the unstable essence of the human condition. For Kircher, humanists registered in this intellectual exercise fall into the categories of finders and seekers: those whose intent is to state the conclusions of their learning and experience, and those who see the exercise itself as revealing how the true and good might be understood by others.

This dual approach depends largely on the humanist authors' view of mankind. Our imperfect and indeed transient nature must be accommodated, restricted as we are by time, death, and an imperfect understanding of all things because of our earthly condition. This is, of course, as Kircher richly illustrates, a Platonic concept, and his analysis of how this animates humanist thought is a particularly useful and interesting aspect of his book. Humanity is necessarily confined by time—and mortality—so we must discover alternate means to understand or even identify the true, the good, or the infinite. This then requires the use of less linear instruments in our quest for transcendent truth

or recognition of what is good; thus, the purpose of theatrical dialogue, allegory, and evocative language emerges. Kircher summarizes this idea himself: “Humanists . . . wear their own personae and react to those worn by others. In the earthly theater, where all abide, distinctions are blurred between the secular and spiritual, the human and the divine” (223).

This argument explains the title of the book, *Before Enlightenment*. Kircher identifies the pre-Cartesian mode of thought as central to Renaissance epistemology. So it is appropriate that the subhead of his final chapter is a quote from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and his second chapter title, “Esse et Videri,” contrasts with the Enlightenment dictum of Bishop Berkeley that “esse est percipi”: Kircher, emulating his humanist models, is engaged in learned playful dialogue and allusive wordplay with his readers.

There is much to recommend this book to any specialist of Renaissance humanism. Although heavily dependent on Italian texts beginning with Petrarch, Kircher moves beyond Italy to trace his observations in later writers such as Rabelais, Erasmus, and Montaigne. The depth of reading is impressive, and the use of less studied texts, such as Bembo’s *De Etna* and Alberti’s *Momus* particularly welcome. Kircher’s insightful interpretation of such a broad compendium of humanist writing alone makes the book a useful additional to a scholarly library.

The major problem with the book is its often unnecessarily opaque prose and awkward organization. Complex ideas find greater currency if revealed with straightforward clarity, and texts are best understood holistically. The reader too often encounters references to what went before and what will appear later. It is understandable that the author wishes to discuss texts from several perspectives, but the recurring back-and-forth analyses reveal the need for a more coherent structure.

That said, the book provides a subtle and rich investigation of humanist thought and writing revealed though a careful and original reading of a great many texts, some very well known, others less current. For this alone Kircher merits our appreciation.

Kenneth Bartlett, *University of Toronto*
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La Fortuna di Omero nel Rinascimento tra Bisanzio e l'Occidente.

Valentina Prosperi and Federica Ciccolella, eds.

Hellencia: Testi e strumenti di letteratura greca antica, medievale e umanistica 84.

Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2020. viii + 212 pp. €20.00.

At the outset of their foreword, Prosperi and Ciccolella emphasize that the recovery of Homer’s epics in Italy—initiated by Byzantine scholars for whom the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* continued to serve as the cornerstones of a literary education—was no “triumphant