Culture and Machines in Renaissance Europe

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This well-written book on an important topic adds to a growing body of related scholarship in the Renaissance and early modern periods. Machines and mechanisms, artisanal culture in general, and instrumentation of various kinds have received much recent scholarly attention—studied not only in relationship to topics in the history of science and technology, but as significant aspects of cultural, political, and intellectual history as well as literature. Yet *Engines of the Imagination*, in the light of this scholarship, is problematic in a number of ways. The book, which began as an idea for a feature program written for BBC Radio 4, bears the marks of its origins. It reads very much like a general survey for a popular readership, yet carries footnotes replete with references to excellent general studies, the huge majority in English, which give the book the appearance of a more scholarly contribution to a burgeoning field. Unfortunately, the footnotes reveal fairly large gaps with regard to recent and not so recent scholarship. Sawday’s approach entails a narrative that contains few attempts to grapple seriously with historiographic issues that would seem to be centrally relevant to the topic at hand. It is a book full of interesting ideas and vivid descriptions, often supported by primary source citations, but often without serious
engagement with those sources or the extensive prior scholarship focused upon them.

The book begins with a discussion of the ambiguous place of technology in Renaissance Europe—both optimistic and pessimistic, including an excursus on Sigmund Freud’s view of machines as “compensatory devices” that work “to deepen a sense of human frailty” (p. 3). Optimistically, machines compensated for the original Fall from Paradise, alleviating human work; pessimistically, they stood at variance with nature and God. Sawday stresses the importance of the sounds of machinery in Renaissance Europe, such as of looms, windmills, and watermills. He provides an interesting analysis of a number of paintings which include machinery, such as *Hunters in the Snow* by Peter Brueghel the Elder (1565, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). He further shows how a group of northern European artists came to identify the Tower of Babel with craft and energy. Throughout the book, he focuses on the Renaissance and early modern centuries, ranging from northern Europe to Italy, but also frequently refers to modern culture. While this range is admirable, Sawday is not interested in investigating local contexts and meanings, and his discussion is often uninformed by the relevant scholarly literature.

Whether the intended readership for this book is the educated public or scholarly specialists or (as I imagine) both, the author’s insufficient engagement with existing scholarship is particularly evident in the first half of the book, which primarily deals with the earlier centuries. For example, in a discussion of mills in medieval England, he cites Jean Gimpel’s *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (1976). The reader is given no clue to the extensive and significant scholarship on medieval mills carried out after the publication of this worthy, but very general and now dated book, nor to the extended criticism of Gimpel’s notion of a medieval “industrial revolution.”

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