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**Armitage, David, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice**  
**(eds.). Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought**

Ernst Gerhardt

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## Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

**Armitage, David, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice (eds.).**  
*Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought.*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xii, 289. ISBN 978-0-521-76808-5 (hardcover) \$95.

Determining how or what Shakespeare thought about politics has proved notoriously difficult. This interdisciplinary volume productively affirms this difficulty. Arranged by their exploration of three broad themes (“Contexts,” “The Court,” and “The Commonwealth”), the thirteen essays collected here characterize Shakespeare’s political thought as a moving target which refuses to be pinned down in one play or poem, let alone the entire body of work. Nevertheless, the volume does outline valuably the contours of Shakespeare’s deep scepticism of politics.

Several contributors argue that Shakespeare proves sceptical of the political thought of his contemporaries. Stephen Greenblatt and Eric Neelson point out that Shakespeare’s political concern was aimed at the question of power and its exercise by individuals rather than more specifically defined questions in the history of political thought. For his part, Greenblatt provocatively suggests that Shakespeare’s political scepticism is a function of his form: in Shakespeare’s plays, characters’ complicated and sometimes opaque self-interests motivate their political actions. Political thought appears secondary to, or a disguise for, self-interested motivation. Neelson, in an excellent essay on the Roman plays’ exploration of the question of what is the best state of a commonwealth, argues that Shakespeare answers sceptically: characters argue in favour of the governmental form that best advances their own self-interests; rhetorical eloquence serves to cloak those interests in the guise of political thought and debate. Moreover, several contributors identify Shakespeare’s rhetorical training, particularly the pedagogical emphasis placed on the ability to argue both sides of a question, as a contributing cause to the slipperiness of his political thought. Shakespeare’s characters espouse competing sides of a question, offering no clear access to Shakespeare’s thought itself on the question.

Early modern rhetoric emerges as one of the volume's themes, particularly humanist attention to rhetoric's relationship to counsel and civic participation. Markku Peltonen, in his chapter on *Coriolanus*, argues that Shakespeare undermines the political virtues of rhetoric by revealing its subordination to self-interest. Cathy Shrank advances a similar argument in her reading of the *Sonnets* as a failure of eloquent counsel. Similarly, David Colcough argues that Shakespeare proves sceptical regarding the efficacy of political instruments: counsel, petitions, and libels falter in *Julius Caesar* because individual characters fail to understand rightly the messages these political instruments convey.

In addition to rhetoric, early modern humanist pedagogy emphasized training in moral virtue, exemplified in traits that came to be associated with urban citizenship. Phil Withington offers a fine account of *honestas*, the concept exemplifying civic responsibility to the common good. He traces the concept in the women's civic engagement in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, aligning the play's emphasis on civic virtue with a burgeoning English culture of citizenship. Jennifer Richards also takes up this moral trait in her discussion of Shakespeare's collaboration with Thomas Middleton in writing *Henry VIII*. Drawing on Annabel Patterson's work, Richards traces the ways in which the collaborative production of Holinshed's *Chronicles* as well as *The Mirrour for Magistrates* sought to express historiographical and political *honestas*. Here, Richards highlights the politics underwriting the expression of history in a temperate, collaborative fashion.

Some contributions do not attend as closely as they might to Shakespeare's texts but instead attach a cursory discussion of Shakespeare to an informed discussion of an aspect of early modern political thought. The effect is to frame Shakespeare's political thought as a response to or reflection of the context rather than as participation in it. For example, after providing a lucid account of the sixteenth-century humanist debate over the virtues of the active and contemplative lives, Cathy Curtis hastily summarizes the plots of eleven plays, emphasizing that the plays stage characters' choices to follow either active or contemplative lives. The summaries are suggestive and provocative of further study, and no doubt constraints of length and purpose — her essay appears in the "Contexts" section of the volume — limited fuller and more nuanced discussion of the plays. And while his reading of *Hamlet* in relation to La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire* is intriguing, Andrew Fitzmaurice too quickly dismisses the reading of Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy as a rumination

on suicide; he unconvincingly interprets the soliloquy as a debate on Hamlet's withdrawal from political engagement.

Nevertheless, the volume presents valuable and deeply knowledgeable discussions of early modern political thought, providing an extremely useful and up-to-date survey of scholarship on a variety of political themes, including succession, the humanist debate over the active and contemplative lives, civic humanism, and republicanism.

ERNST GERHARDT, *Laurentian University*

**Bates, Catherine.**

*Masculinity, Gender, and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric.*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. viii, 263. ISBN 978-0-521-88287-3 (hardcover) \$95.

This book presents a variety of “perverse” Renaissance masculinities — masculinities that deviate from a phallic norm, are abject failures, and confuse due to their radical alterity — as writing subjects and as depictions within poetic works. Catherine Bates focuses on the work of canonical English authors Sidney, Raleigh, Shakespeare, and Donne, but chooses her case studies from among the most problematic and marginal works of these authors. Over the course of her analysis she also interrogates the modern critical approaches that have largely erased or transformed these perverse masculinities. In fact, Bates's criticism of the various critical “recuperative strategies” through which abjection is turned back into power, and linguistic failure into authorial mastery, is one of the most exciting aspects of this book — as is her alternative approach, which is to preserve the internal contradictions and ambiguity around gender in these works with the goal of allowing their authors to be emasculated, and to fail. Informed by Silverman's work on the “dominant fiction” of masculinity and Fineman's readings of Shakespeare's sonnets, as well as by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Bates provides nuanced readings of neglected works by these canonical authors. Her analyses suggest that the reason these works have been neglected, even to the point of having their authorship contested, is tied