

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



# Lake, Peter. How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays

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Volume 42, Number 4, Fall 2019

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068606ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068606ar>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2019). Review of [Lake, Peter. How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 238–241.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1068606ar>

“The reports of the Shepheards”] was changed to ‘Greenes Arcadia,’ presumably in an attempt to lift Greene to Sidney’s level of deceased eminence. By 1610 the phrase ‘Greenes Arcadia’ had become the book’s whole title” (69).

In the general editor’s preface to the series, Patrick Parrinder writes, “At a time when new technologies are challenging the dominance of the printed book and when the novel’s ‘great tradition’ is sometimes said to have foundered, [I] believe that the *Oxford History* will stand out as a record of the extraordinary adaptability and resilience of the novel in English” (xvi). The statement alludes to a famous instance of definition. At the sight of a sinking ship, amid cries of fear from his fellow shipmates, Robinson Crusoe admits, “It was my advantage in one respect, that I did not know what they meant by *founder*” (1719 ed., 12, my italics). By tracing the early beginnings of “the novel” within an age of “prose fiction,” Keymer and his authors make strides to place what is “the novel” within a larger, malleable framework of writing styles, one that can be adapted to the pressures of new media.

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### **Lake, Peter.**

#### ***How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays.***

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 688. ISBN 978-0-300-22271-5 (hardcover) US\$37.50.

Peter Lake’s voluminous book about the political context of Shakespeare’s history plays is a product of reading a large body of Catholic texts and documents against some documents of the English Reformation. The book’s focus is a discussion of most of the “interesting and important” elements of the “politics and political culture of the 1590s” (xi). These elements include the nature of Englishness as it was represented and tested in this crucial decade: the achievement and instruments of operation during the Elizabethan regime. Study of the politics of the 1590s—as Lake demonstrates in impressive detail and with nuanced interpretation—involves an analysis of rebellion, bastardy, usurpation, Parliament, providence, predestination, clerical conspiracy, political tyranny

and animosity, hereditary claims to land and reign, sedition, “machievellian calculation” (33), rhetorical maneuverings of those in power and those who demand it through force, competition for honour, and chronicle histories that counter the court “secret histories” (32), as well as concise discussion of the plays within the historical context of political events and currents. It also entails reading “promiscuously across different styles and moments in literary criticism” (xi), by which Lake means moving broadly through a vast period of literary history on the subject, and citing from books that one generally no longer comes across in footnotes and bibliographies. Yet this is what gives Lake’s historical interpretation critical depth, breadth, and solidity. In bringing together a diverse body of texts, Lake gives detailed summative and interpretative accounts of their interrelatedness as makers of meaning.

The book’s subtitle captures the gist of what preoccupied the historical and theatrical texts of the 1590s. Organizing a large body of this kind of material is a complex task, but Lake succeeds in structuring the book in a way that follows the established chronology of the writing of Shakespeare’s history plays—most of which, before we come to *Julius Caesar* (1599), belong to the early part of Shakespeare’s career.

The first sixty pages of the book are devoted to a methodological and structural survey of the historical and epistemological background to the book’s engagement with drama and theatre history, as well as covering the critical literature on the plays themselves and on the theatrical milieu that produced plays of Tudor succession in the late 1580s and into the 1590s.

Having shown how the historical past and their documents enabled the staging of history in the present, Lake explores “the politics of lost legitimacy” in parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI*. Here, as throughout the book, Lake focuses on the historical issue that both colours a specific text and provides the contextual backbone of his narrative—without weighing his discussion with lengthy quotations from the Catholic pamphlets in which the succession in England is heavily debated.

The third part discusses part 1 of *Henry III* and its succession piece, *Richard III*, and makes a fresh comparison of this play (and its dense rhetoric of power) with the early Roman tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. What connects these three plays, and what Lake elaborates on in this section, is the replacement of “ancient political virtue from civil to military affairs” (125) and the dramatic debate about the “topos of noble faction” (125) in military conduct. Faction,

succession, and heroic virtue are explored in an engaging narrative about the play in which history and literature are seamlessly discussed.

The fourth part centres on an analysis of two related plays, *King John* and *Richard II*. Since the former play tends to be unjustly neglected in theatre and criticism, the devotion of a long chapter to the interlocking of the historical and theatrical reigns of the medieval King John is a welcome re-assessment of the play in context. What I have found particularly helpful are Lake's seamless and persuasive connections between clusters of plays across chapters, so that one sees the history play as an organic whole in the staging of politics—making links in a sea of disparate events and texts—rather than as individual plays that pick up on individual threads pulled by different factions in the political theatre of the Elizabethan state. Lake's incisive caption for the politics of the crusade in *1 Henry 4* announced at the end of *Richard II*—"the politics of commodity" (292)—and the explanation of how this purpose frames the politics on stage in the former play demonstrate Lake's cross-referencing of plays and the interweaving of their major themes.

In the sixth part, Lake delves into the difficult and critically and historically rewarding territory of uncovering the ways in which the plays were read and interpreted when performed. The goal is to test the hypotheses presented in the previous chapters. The focus is on the Falstaff/Oldcastle connection with the names of Brook/Lord Cobham, rivals of the earl of Essex, who requested that the name Sir John Oldcastle be changed on the grounds of their descendancy. Lake's detailed analysis is a most reliable account of this tangled issue.

Part 7 presents the Roman history *Julius Caesar* in relation to the staging of republicanism in Elizabeth's Christian monarchy. But it also shows in detail how in this Roman play, as in *Henry V*, the "incapacity" (437) of others undoes the "effort to transform" (437) a state, Roman or English, respectively. Unsurprisingly, the topic of heroic honour is discussed in its many political and historical manifestations, both on stage and in the political arena of the 1590s. Lake finishes with a discussion of *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*, reveals the English politics behind the performed Danish politics, and offers in contrast a reading of *Troilus and Cressida* as "evoking and evaluating the political and moral wreckage left by the debacle of the Essex rebellion" (534).

The conclusion ties together effectively all the main threads from the book's analyses, showing once again Lake's interpretative skill in connecting a myriad of historical fragments and loosely related stories of events, acts,

genders, and historical figures, in a distilled critical point about the historical basis of the plays. At this moment, when English history plays are experiencing a comeback in the theatre, Lake's book will be of value to scholars, students, and the general reader seriously interested in Elizabethan history based on scrupulous research. We need such books to understand how these complex and brilliant plays gave Shakespeare a distinct dramatic identity in the crowded and competitive theatre scene of 1590s London.

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**Maira, Daniel.**

*Renaissance romantique. Mises en fiction du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle (1814–1848).*

Genève : Droz, 2018. 647 p. ISBN 978-2-600-05812-4 (broché) 62 CHF.

Le romantisme français, comprenant la Restauration (1814–1830) et la Monarchie de Juillet (1830–1848), n'est pas seulement une période riche en développements nouveaux au sein de la production littéraire, mais connaît aussi une intensification exponentielle de la critique et de la théorie, que stimulent les débats politiques de ces années. L'instrumentalisation du passé qui se fait dans ce contexte a été maintes fois étudiée, en premier lieu celle du Moyen Âge. Il est donc étonnant de voir l'absence presque totale de travaux consacrés à la représentation romantique de la Renaissance, alors que, dans les œuvres littéraires de la période romantique, cette époque est tout aussi présente que le Moyen Âge et se prête tout aussi bien à la récupération politique. Daniel Maira est le premier à entreprendre de présenter dans son ensemble l'image romantique de la Renaissance.

Maira examine de nombreux textes littéraires (d'auteurs connus comme de *minores*) et leur paratexte, ainsi que des textes théoriques sur la littérature. S'y ajoutent quelques ouvrages historiques généraux ainsi que des cours professés par des personnages comme Ozanam, Michelet ou Quinet. Son approche relève essentiellement de la sociocritique, non sans intégrer des éléments des *queer studies*, mais vise toujours à établir un rapport avec la situation politique et les opinions des différents partis, ce qui se justifie pleinement dans ces années 1814–1848.