

The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts. Victoria Kahn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. xiii + 246 pp. \$45.

Struggling to understand the fraught affiliations between religion and the state, scholars across disciplines have turned in recent years to political theology — to Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and Ernst Kantorowicz, among others — for guidance and insight. *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* adds invaluable historical and conceptual perspective to this turn in contemporary thought, as Victoria Kahn demonstrates the importance of early modernity to twentieth-century theses on political theology. Kahn stages a detailed conversation across periods, drawing archives together with exemplary clarity, shuttling seamlessly between modern Germany and its Renaissance pasts. But *The Future of Illusion* is no mere study of reception. It is strikingly original and effective, explicating in tandem twentieth-century and early modern approaches, giving depth to crises of liberalism and statecraft, and exploring old (read: Renaissance) solutions to what often masquerade as new problems.

The Future of Illusion challenges many assumptions about political theology — namely, Schmitt's influential thesis that modern ideas of sovereignty and political life are secularized versions of theological concepts. Kahn's signal contribution is her refusal to cede symbolism, myth, or *poesis* to religion, denying that religion holds any monopoly on forms of imagination or transcendence. She discovers (in the early modern sources as well as in Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Erich Auerbach, and Hans Blumenberg) a nonreligious concept of *poesis* at the origin of modern liberalism. This abiding concern with *poesis* shapes the book. In chapter 1, Kahn demonstrates how both Hobbes and Shakespeare, contra Schmitt, see *poesis* and theater as the ground for politics, not as a flight from engaged political life. Chapter 2 continues this discussion of Shakespearean politics and its import to German political theology. Kahn discovers both Shakespeare's and Kantorowicz's discontent with Schmitt; human *poesis* subtends political myth in *The King's Two Bodies* and *Richard II*, not some vestigial trace of the sacred. For Kahn, the early modern period is one in which artists and citizens alike began to see signs as signs, myths as myths, political power as decidedly human.

In chapter 3 Kahn marshals Machiavelli's crucial account of *virtù* against both Schmitt and Strauss. For Schmitt, Machiavelli is a prophet against liberalism; for Strauss, Machiavelli reduces politics to an instrumental science that inevitably gives way to historicism, relativism, and the crises of modern political life. Wresting him from this

impasse, Kahn brilliantly demonstrates how Machiavelli develops a poetic approach to politics — poetic insofar as he reflects on the human fictions, including religion, that shape political life. Kahn turns her attention to Baruch Spinoza in chapter 4, recovering his critique of political theology from Strauss before examining Spinoza's own detailed approach to politics. For Kahn, Spinoza ostensibly invents Enlightenment determinations of culture and literature to transform the meanings of religion and scripture, respectively. Religion is at once relegated to the sphere of culture and subject to the liberal state; scripture, in turn, is subject to literary analysis in a manner that reveals its historicity and artificiality. Spinoza is also integral to chapter 5, as Kahn examines his importance to Freud before recuperating Freud's audacious atheist modernity, his valorization of Renaissance artistic genius (Michelangelo and Leonardo), and his diagnosis of religion as irrational (if not hysterical).

The Future of Illusion is an exciting book, not only in its content, but its method. Some of the most compelling moments come when Kahn exposes early modern solutions to modern crises, as Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Shakespeare offer crucial insight into contemporary events despite later interlocutors' attempts to recruit them in the name of political theology. While the polemical thrust of the book is ultimately refreshing, it does make for some strange omissions: there is virtually no reference to Spinoza's *Ethics*, a work that many since Hegel have cited to challenge precisely those liberal forms of subjectivity and political life Kahn advocates; moreover, Kahn does not explore the Renaissance sources of the Freudian unconscious or his economic model of psychic life — dynamic concepts that reveal a very different Spinozism at work. But these are reasonable absences given the scope and conceptual foundations of the work. Kahn sets a new standard for scholars testing the relevance of early modernity in later periods, tracing the broad contours of a theoretical debate with rigor, commitment, and expertise.

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