

Barbara J. Shapiro. *Political Communication and Political Culture in England, 1558–1688*.

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The study of political communication has become increasingly central to early modern political history. Important studies of France, Venice, and the United Provinces have helped remake the field as the study of “political culture.” Nowhere has this transformation been more acute than in English history, where studies of representation, image making, and pamphleteering have become perhaps the dominant mode of historical writing.

In the present work, Barbara J. Shapiro surveys the genres of political expression current in England from the accession of Elizabeth to the fall of James II. In a moment when scholars sometimes seem trapped within the limits of their expertise, Shapiro’s command is stunning. The book — which Shapiro describes as a “march through the various genres” (272) — makes a serious effort to be exhaustive. Each chapter takes a single genre or family of genres, such as drama, sermons, or historical writing, and tracks it through the entire late Tudor and Stuart era. For historians that work on shorter spans, the effect can be revelatory. Discourse that works one way in the 1590s or 1620s can sound very different in the 1650s or 1670s. Shapiro’s assembly of sources frequently surprise. To anyone working on a related topic, Shapiro’s book will be required reading for this reason alone.

The impact of each chapter varies. Some are based on Shapiro’s own research and reasoning. An analysis of the content of assize sermons is long overdue and necessary, and the chapter on “empirical political description” is an important contribution in its own right, recognizing reporting and description as a form of structured discourse. Other chapters are more synthetic and rely heavily on secondary literature. Generally, those acquainted with historiographical debates over revisionism and the public sphere will find themselves on familiar terrain.

Shapiro spends a great deal of the introduction and conclusion defending the book’s structure, and it is easy to see why she thought it needed defending. Separating each genre into its own chapter allows readers to see them change over time, but also keeps the genres from speaking to each other. Rather than seeing how different modes of communication combined to create a distinct political culture in, say, the 1650s, the reader instead gets a story about news, and then a different (though related) story about history, and so on. Indeed, the entire chronology, from 1558 to 1688, is repeated in each chapter. Watershed moments, persons, and even quotations recur at regular intervals. Despite the problems introduced by this approach (problems Shapiro herself notes), it is clearly useful: working by genre allows Shapiro to more or less discover microgenres, like the “ghost dialogue” pamphlet, of which Shapiro is able to cite over fifty examples.

The text is marred by occasional errors of fact and consequent errors of interpretation (Jonson’s *Sejanus* was probably not meant primarily as a critique of the Duke of Buckingham, as Shapiro suggests on 131, since the future duke was

only eleven when it was first produced), and readers would be advised to double-check points of interest.

It is also sometimes difficult to understand precisely what Shapiro means by *political communication* or by *political culture*. As a result, Shapiro's descriptions of what is included and excluded sound slightly circular. "While most sermons focused on doctrine and practical piety," Shapiro writes, other sermons "dealt with political topics" (4), and only the latter are treated here. Similarly, "while most trials were not political in character," others "became the focus of political excitement and comment," and can be categorized as "political trials" (4). Shapiro's intention, it seems, is to hold back the imperialist tendencies of the political-culture concept. This is admirable. However, doing so persuasively requires some explorations of the limits of the political. Shapiro's work will perhaps provoke scholars, not simply to add new genres Shapiro left out, but to consider how and why some genres become or cease to be political.

Finally, given her interest in education, Shapiro gives surprisingly little attention to reception, and writes that understanding what people learned from the texts she investigates is "difficult, and sometimes impossible" (270). While this is undoubtedly true, it is nonetheless possible to do more than gesture, and I hope future studies take up the challenge.

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