

Martin Wiggins. *Drama and the Transfer of Power in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 152 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-0-19-965059-0.

Martin Wiggins sets out to demonstrate the ways in which drama — in this case mostly as pageants or masques — functions to ease the vast tensions and anxieties that arise when power passes from regime to regime in the English Renaissance. Drama does so, he claims, because it becomes a form of communication between subjects and monarch and can act as an indirect validation of an incoming regime. Elizabeth I, for example, used her power to shape drama for her own ends, James I asserted his new dynasty through drama, and Charles I comes off as a monarch deaf to the harmonies drama could engender.

When this book discusses modes of theater and modes of power, the topic fascinates. Where no texts survive, Wiggins looks to expenditures of London trade guilds (responsible for “civic pageants” [5]), the Revels Office (responsible for “court theatre” [5]), and eyewitness accounts for insights into the drama underwriting transfers of power. For reconstructing the nature and purpose of a masque, for example, he looks to accounts of the costuming.

While not all of Wiggins’s conclusions bear the same weight, the chapter that examines the Stuart use of Tudor clothing is particularly compelling. He shows the

implications of Queen Anne's use of the dead Elizabeth I's clothes in a masque: Queen Anne modified the extensive royal wardrobe for her own use. In so doing she made it clear that "the Tudors were consigned to history; the Stuarts were the masters now" (64).

Perhaps Wiggins's best, and certainly his most chilling, work comes in the last chapter, "Closedown." In it, he methodically and compellingly marshals evidence to show how "very contingent a set of circumstances" (113) closed the London theaters. In 1642, Wiggins shows, theaters were shut down, not because Parliament was full of Zeal-of-the-Land Busys (98), but because drama was pushed to the center of a perfect storm, a maelstrom of coincidence and contingency, and there perished.

Were the book to stick more closely to these kinds of explorations of power and theater, my review would end here. But some methodological problems plague this book. Most arise when Wiggins goes too far in his reconstructions of dramas (plays, masques, pageants) for which texts no longer exist. This fault becomes marked when one notes the number of times the text pushes beyond phrases like "but, always, evidence is incomplete" (5); "with no documentary evidence in play" (13); "all of that is informed guesswork" (25); "much is irrecoverable, but pushing the evidence to its very limits reveals an intriguing possibility" (28); or "I am making a large assumption based on slender evidence" (44). There are many more such phrases, but the author could easily explore his more solid observations and his archival investigations while avoiding so much radical speculation.

But I have a theory about all this supposition. The archival work itself, I conjecture, is such a labor of love that the author cannot bear to leave anything out. Yet we do not need almost seven pages of extensive speculation about the arches erected for Charles I's entry into London (an entry that never came about). The details overwhelm the overall argument. And some speculation is simply weak: the attempt to match Aloisio Schivenoglia's eyewitness account with documents from the early Elizabethan Revels Office does not compel. After all, eyewitness accounts — in any historical period, including our own — are notoriously unreliable. And eyewitness accounts are of a different genre than documents listing itemized expenses. The two do not mix well, but it's hard to sit on archival gold.

Nevertheless this remains a book that explores drama and politics in a new way and with sharp tools. This is a book for students and scholars alike who are interested in the ways in which Renaissance drama worked to connect monarch and subject, to ease the passing of regimes, and to perform important ideological work. The work on the closing of the theaters itself is profoundly valuable as, in 1642, the drama that served to lubricate transfers of power was shut down.

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