

Mary Nyquist. *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xiii + 422 pp. \$45. ISBN: 978-0-226-01553-8.

In the rank of those literary studies that aspire to be taken seriously by intellectual historians of political theory, this book is easily one of the most brilliant and transformative volumes that I have encountered in years. Nyquist focuses on a dilemma experienced by anyone who has ever tried to teach the final books of *Paradise Lost*: what are the interrelations between, on the one hand, a metaphorical servitude (specifically political, though Nyquist is certainly aware of the spiritual/moral interiorization of bondage) and, on the other, the sociolegal realities of chattel slavery? In a wide-ranging but intensely focused and powerfully cumulative study, Nyquist uncovers both the utter unprecipitability of the interrelations between political and legal slavery but also their tenacious and intense discursive interlockings in the theories of sovereignty and in arguments against tyranny from Aristotle to Locke. This book is distinguished both by its exceptionally rigorous close readings of key rhetorical formulations, including the hendiadys of the “power of life and death,” and by its original and searingly clear abstractions such as the “privative age,” in which a primordial people is said to lack the constituents of civil society for better or worse — an ancient formulation that takes on new colonial significance once contemporary cultures (in the New World or in Africa) are conflated in early modernity with those mythic peoples from the golden age and Eden. Another crucial notion focuses on the history of the derivation of slavery from the conqueror’s (at least temporary) gift of life to prisoners of war, so that to enslave is etymologically tangled with the victor’s decision to preserve (treated extensively in chapter 6).

Arbitrary Rule is so replete with excellent material, cogent arguments, and powerful readings that it is indeed arbitrary to single a few out for a review. Beginning with a first chapter on ancient Greece and Rome, especially with the highly influential *Politics* of Aristotle (and later with the more surprising importance of Cicero’s *De inventione*), the book’s second chapter on resistance theory in

sixteenth-century England and France is also one of its most widely ranging, engaging with Étienne de La Boétie, Montaigne, Christopher Goodman, John Ponet, Jean Bodin, and Thomas Smith. One of the most revealing dimensions of the book features in the third chapter, namely, Nyquist's careful, complex study of the ways in which political thinking and arguing depended on nodal passages in the Bible, with an impressive exposition of the ways in which Jephtha's sacrifice of his daughter in the book of Judges is reworked by, among other playwrights, the antityrannical theorist George Buchanan. Moving into revolutionary England in the middle of the seventeenth century, chapter 4 offers one of the most helpful readings of the final book of *Paradise Lost* that I have ever read — this section seemed almost designed to help this teacher of Milton make sense of the vagaries and nuances of enslavement in that text. This chapter also commences the book's extended reconsideration of Hobbes's demolition of the antityrannists and their notions of liberty, a rethinking that will eventually take up two separate chapters, and Nyquist's bold assessment of why and how Hobbes cared about colonial America. Chapter 4 continues the book's engagement with the biblical basis of political thought, but also turns to the iconography of antityranny in illuminating accounts of the repackagings of two images, one the Hebraic slave's ear bored with an awl, the other the Dutch image of the liberty cap. Iconography also plays a key role in chapter 7's focus on the valuation of nakedness, with an incisive analysis of Theodor de Bry's engraving of Adam and Eve in America. This chapter persists with the theme of natural slavery (peoples judged to be so barbaric, to be so lacking in the qualities of civility as to require a master) but also returns to Milton in further pursuit of the rhetoric of privative comparison. Final chapters on Hobbes and Locke, their focuses in many ways among the most familiar for political historians, are also the most daring and compelling of the book, since they venture to answer pesky questions that have plagued so many scholars, not least whether the great antagonist of tyranny Locke really in fact believed in the legitimacy of chattel slavery. Nyquist's explanation of Hobbes's contractual understanding of slavery is one of many highlights in these final chapters.

This summary doesn't come close to taking stock of the riches of this book. In speaking above of its arguments as transformative, I meant that Nyquist succeeds in altering and enriching an early modern scholar's understanding of familiar issues — analogical thinking for instance, or the patriarchal mediations between the domestic and the national realms — simply by recasting those issues within the book's dogged pursuit to answer the question that it disarmingly poses from the beginning: whence and why the metaphor that citizens or subjects under a tyrant in a state are somehow slaves? Despite this wonderfully lucid announcement of the book's inception in a question, the chapters are not in the least simple, nor should they be. I worked hard to make my way through this book, and my understanding of the religious-political literature of early modernity is much stronger as a result.

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