

Timothy Hampton. *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe*.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. xii + 236 pp. index. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4775-4.

For some time now Timothy Hampton has been writing smartly about the relationship among politics, social practices, and literature, and his most recent book advances this project by examining the figure of the diplomat as a cultural mediator and the crucial role of diplomacy in early modern Europe. He covers a great deal of ground and writes with authority. The book is riddled with first person interventions, as Hampton in a sense acts out the role of the diplomat himself and commands our attention as he moves us from one text to another. And I make the comparison advisedly. In a book that obsesses on strategies of doubling and self-conscious acts of representation, Hampton — a comparatist crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries — is, like the *messaggeri* he studies, bumping up against, traversing, erasing, and redefining boundaries in the very moment that he labors with great rhetorical efficacy at getting the message right.

*Fictions of Embassy*, which is indebted to New Historicism and related issues of “negotiation,” is not a book that can be covered adequately in a brief review. In terms of authors it ranges from Machiavelli to Montaigne, Tasso to More, Shakespeare to Racine, Corneille to Camões, Guicciardini to Gentili, with a coda on Stendhal. The topics covered are equally broad in scope. At stake in thinking about the figure of the diplomat and the diplomatic function are a host of issues that Hampton deftly explores in a variety of test cases and genres, from the essay to epic, tragedy to romance. The making of diplomacy occupies an analogous position to the making of literature insofar as both activities are invested in fiction making, linguistic performances, code switching, recognition scenes, and the theatrical manipulation of

representations (indeed, even the representation of representations). Both are eminently symbolic acts that make thoughtful use of semiotic systems of exchange and distinct, as well as shared, writing practices, topoi, and traditions. The diplomatic moment also stages the limits of rhetoric, agency, emergent national identities, political prowess, genre, and professional posturing. Reflecting on diplomacy within texts provides authors with the occasion for not only thinking about but also actively constructing authority and selfhood. Diplomacy not only shapes literature, with scenes of negotiation functioning in texts as privileged loci for authorial self-reflection (particularly with regard to the shaping of novel literary forms), but literature, we are encouraged to think, in its turn shapes diplomacy. Diplomacy stages the very issues of absence and presence that are encoded into linguistic utterances, just as the diplomatic moment (as does literature) raises issues about dialogue, message delivery systems, social interaction, success in failure, and compromise. Diplomacy, like literature, functions as a battleground for competing interests and thus becomes a sort of contact zone where the familiar and unfamiliar, the domestic and foreign, the self and Other, the real and ideal, the morally justified and politically expedient, the universal and contingent, duplicity and transparency, prudence and sincerity, all come together and engage in an ongoing ideological struggle. The impressive list of topics covered goes on.

The book does not always unfold chronologically, but it does give the illusion of historical progression. Hampton has a knack for projecting historical development onto a narrative that is constructed through test cases and is therefore necessarily discontinuous, just as he has a knack for compression (he manages to pack a lot into few pages, though the notes sometimes felt thin). We begin with what appears to be an uncomplicated, happy scenario — Lorenzo de' Medici's ambassadorial mission to Naples — and then move forward in time toward what seem to be cases of ever-increasing cultural complexity fraught with problems and anxieties — such as, in one of the final chapters, Hamlet as “th'ambassador that was bound for England.” In the end I'm not sure if the development of diplomacy in practice in the period and the development of diplomacy as it is investigated by writers in literature over time fit so neatly together (much less separately) into a smooth genealogy of narrative complexity. Hampton has admittedly stacked the deck, with an obvious, but always engaging, selection bias, as he tells his story by mining the canon and by moving for the most part from the heroic to the tragic. And I'm not entirely convinced that the “new” diplomacy and “new” style of political practice, which ushered in the “new” figure of the resident ambassador at a moment when a “new” approach to rhetoric was being developed by humanists, directly generated so much that was “new” in terms of literary genres, conventions, forms, styles, and the like. That is, Hampton is perhaps sometimes making too many aggressive claims for the historical role of diplomacy itself as a singular decisive agent of innovative change for literary history.

But no matter. This is a splendid innovative book that significantly complicates and enriches our understanding of a period in which much innovation was indeed taking place in politics, culture, and literature — a book full of exciting twists and

turns, original, challenging observations about canonical authors, and impressive depth and breadth.

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