
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Kahn, Victoria. The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts

David Katz

Volume 39, Number 1, Winter 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087151ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26560>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Katz, D. (2016). Review of [Kahn, Victoria. The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(1), 184–187. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26560>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

As the audience changed, so did forms and modes of discourse. In the end, the author remarks that the 1640s was a time in history when it was “both possible and to their [the authors’] mind, desirable, to make a difference to society though the writing and dissemination of utopian literature” (162).

Houston leaves the reader with the impression that the love story between utopia and social reform rose to its zenith a little more than a century after the publication of More’s *Utopia*. This is the most significant message of this meticulously researched and beautifully argued book—that there was a time when utopias were considered relevant for the improvement of society; when they were taken seriously and not considered naive flights of fancy. And who is to say that such a time might not come back?

CRISTINA PERISSINOTTO
University of Ottawa

Kahn, Victoria.

The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 246. ISBN 978-0-226-08387-2 (hardcover) US\$45.

Victoria Kahn’s *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* examines modern readings of works from the early modern period, showing that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ turn away from essentialist validations for authority, transcendental justifications of the state, in favour of poiesis (“making”) as a new form of knowledge, served as a point of contention for twentieth-century intellectuals. Faced with the failure of liberal secularism to offer a defense of its values when challenged by totalitarianism, authors such as Carl Schmitt, Ernst Kantorowicz, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Sigmund Freud all critically engaged with the point in history they understood as a decisive break from older forms of political legitimation. Certain figures, such as Schmitt, viewed this secular demarcation as catastrophic; others, such as Kantorowicz and Freud, saw this break as a productive moment in the relationship between human creativity and political activity. Every author examined by Kahn uses early-modern poiesis to construct an argument about modernity.

Casting the structure of *The Future of Illusion* as a “typology of the modes of poiesis,” chapter 1 begins with an interrogation of Carl Schmitt’s readings of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Kahn notes that, for Schmitt, the early modern period is “at once the paradigm of the genuinely political and the locus of its demise” (20). Schmitt attempts to read Hobbes as divided between an emerging liberalism and a receding idea of political justification, with the authority of Hobbes’s sovereign trapped in a no man’s land between myth and representation. Schmitt’s preference for personalism over representation, however, causes him to underestimate the knowing fictionality of Hobbes’s concept of legitimation, what Kahn refers to as “the self-conscious theatricality of Hobbesian representation” (35). In part as a response to the unsuitability of Hobbes for his project, the later Schmitt uses *Hamlet* to counter *Leviathan’s* myth of early modern politics, interpreting the play as dramatizing the conflicts of the Reformation just at the moment before these conflicts are resolved by the emergence of the nation-state. *Hamlet*, according to Schmitt, integrates history into drama in order to represent a state of emergency requiring a decision from the play’s protagonist. Yet, as in his earlier use of Hobbes, Schmitt bases his interpretation on a misreading, a distinction between aesthetics and politics, performance and praxis, that *Hamlet* repeatedly undermines: “Hamlet learns that acting and playacting are not necessarily opposed, as Schmitt seems to think they are” (46). Ultimately, Kahn interprets *Hamlet or Hecuba* as an attempt to make Shakespeare’s tragedy into an allegory for Schmitt’s own “tragic” decisions and his involvement with the Nazi party.

Continuing with modern exegeses of Shakespeare, chapter 2 focuses on Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous analysis of *Richard II* in *The King’s Two Bodies*. Kahn shows that Kantorowicz reads political and legal theory as a form of fiction, a poiesis that historically leads toward the separation between the person and office of monarch, and eventually even toward constitutionalism. In examining political theology as a fiction, Kantorowicz articulates a powerful vision of literature’s capacity “for ideological critique and for enabling fictions of human community” (60). Chapter 3 glosses the relationship of Schmitt and Strauss to Machiavelli. Whereas Schmitt admires Machiavelli for his decisionism and anti-liberalism, Strauss condemns the author of the *Prince* for breaking with medieval theology in favour of historicism and relativism. In this regard, Kahn broadly agrees with Strauss in reading the Florentine as a modern, but unlike the conservative theorist she stresses the continuing relevance of Machiavelli’s

concept of virtue and its relation to man's "creative and poetic powers to make or shape his own experience" (85). In particular, Kahn views Machiavelli's pragmatic description of the uses and abuses of religion in shaping communities as a possible solution to the problem of the neutrality of value in liberalism.

The rest of Kahn's book concentrates on readings of Benedict de Spinoza. Pushing against Strauss, Schmitt, and their descendents in the recent "return to religion," chapter 4 picks up on interpretations from Hannah Arendt, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Macherey, showing that Spinoza's critique of scripture unites historical contextualization and textuality; his invitation to rationally evaluate scripture and culture as humanly constructed artifacts resembles a "dialectical mode of interpretation" more in line with literary analysis than instrumental reason (142). Chapter 5 likewise considers Spinoza's influence, presenting Sigmund Freud as an important successor to the seventeenth-century philosopher. Faced with an increasingly precarious political situation and deeply invested in responding to the so-called "Jewish Question," the late Freud contributes to what Yirmiyahu Yovel terms the "dark enlightenment" through a Spinozist reading of Jewish history in *Moses and Monotheism*, one that both builds and departs from an earlier interest in the Moses of the Italian Renaissance. At the same time, like Spinoza before him, the founder of psychoanalysis consistently distinguishes between the illusions offered by religion (delusionary fantasy-work related to neurosis) and art (salutary and productive manifestations of imagination and desire).

The Future of Illusion intervenes in the crisis in liberalism and forcefully critiques the current debate over the grounding of modern politics: a tendency in recent scholarship to accept functionalist narratives that view apparently secular justifications as replacements for theological explanations, a conversation that overlooks aesthetic modes of reasoning from early modernity in favour of the less radical enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Kahn makes a decisive case for the role of art in the discussion of political value while assuming from her reader an investment in the project of a secular liberal culture. Given that Kahn's subjects are responding to the failures of the Enlightenment, I would have appreciated further engagement with the anti-liberal left (Kahn's too sporadic references to Walter Benjamin, Arendt, Althusser, Macherey, even Theodor Adorno, invariably illuminate). Still, *The Future of Illusion* does excellent work in multiple fields. While this monograph will be productively read by early modernists, its greatest contribution could be in directing scholars of political

theology and twentieth-century thought toward important but frequently neglected sites for future exploration.

DAVID KATZ

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Kyd, Thomas.

The Spanish Tragedy: Authoritative Text, Sources and Context, Criticism. Ed. Michael Neill.

A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014. Pp. xl, 289 + 5 ill. ISBN 978-0-393-93400-7 (paperback) US\$13.12.

Michael Neill's edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* provides an opportunity to rethink the play's canonical significance and to appreciate the difficult choices facing editors who work with the space restrictions of print editions.

It's clear from Neill's introduction that he wants us to pay careful attention to the details of language, style, metre, and literary devices, and to note Kyd's "frequent uses of stichomythia" (xii) and plenty of "carefully balanced figures of antithesis and chiasmus" (xiv). Stylistic shifts, too, "mimic" Hieronimo's conflicted psyche. Neill speaks of Kyd's "ceremonious style" (xvi) being disrupted by—and sometimes mirroring—larger rhetorical and political shifts in action and plot. Thus, the play's minutiae are inextricably connected to its theme, which, says Neill, is "the administration of law [...] [that] was often haphazard and sometimes corrupt" (xxix).

For Neill, the play "established the set of conventions" defining the whole revenge tragedy subgenre (xxvii). The persistence of the play's many printings and stagings testifies to its rightful place in the early modern canon. The same sentiment was expressed earlier by J. R. Mulryne (Th. Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1989, rpt. 2000), who was also enraptured by "the play's enormous and long-lived popularity" (xxxiv). While I concur with Neill's and Mulryne's assessment, I wonder how many students (and academics) are drawn to the play more by the force of its ancestral affinity to *Hamlet* than by the attractiveness of its literary merits.

The Spanish Tragedy's problematic textual history emerges from discrepancies between Abel Jeffe's and Edward White's 1592 octavo-in-fours