

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Parvini, Neema. Shakespeare and New Historicist Theory

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086057ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29550>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2018). Review of [Parvini, Neema. Shakespeare and New Historicist Theory]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(1), 226–229. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29550>

© 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, 2018

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/>

Parvini, Neema.

Shakespeare and New Historicist Theory.

Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare series. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. Pp. 202. ISBN 978-1-4742-4098-7 (paperback) US\$29.95.

New Historicism determined the critical practice of interpreting Shakespeare, and English Renaissance literature more broadly, between the 1980s and the late 1990s. Neema Parvini's concise and polemical retelling of this once powerful mode of critical reading is a useful reminder of what was gained by New Historicism, what its limitations were, and what kind of legacy it has left. Like the critical subject it explores, this book, too, is metacritical. As such, it is ambitious in its attempt to challenge, by way of historiography, the gaps in the methodological and interpretative foundation of New Historicism. It also grapples succinctly with New Historicism's arguments across a range of theoretical and ideological interpretative practices, like feminism. It offers an exploration of the legacy of New Historicism and proposes a model of the post-New Historicist act of reading by advocating a turn to the "everyday."

It is encouraging to read in Parvini's eloquent and smooth metacritical prose that New Historicism looks different if its modes of interpretation are viewed against the historical methodology of Fernand Braudel and Geoffrey R. Elton, whose historical work on the Mediterranean and Tudor England, respectively, serves the purpose of situating New Historicism "into the historiographical landscape of broader twentieth-century trends" (xi). Parvini also makes a distinction between two very different, but not competing, ways of interpreting history and handling evidence. He spends some time writing about the philosophical, anthropological, and theoretical "progenitors" (vi) of New Historicism, especially Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and Clifford Geertz, whose ideas are deeply embedded in New Historicism writing. Given their formative influence on New Historicism, it is understandable that Parvini needs to address them so that he can establish the basis for the arguments to follow. In doing so, he inevitably rehearses the familiar.

Yet, both metacritics of New Historicism and the practitioners of New Historicism miss an opportunity to look beyond these well-known "progenitors," whose writing is concerned with investigating historical periods other than the specific moment in the early modernity when Shakespeare wrote, and turn to the twentieth-century historiography that, perhaps better

than even Braudel and Elton, provides a sharper context for New Historicism, both methodologically and in terms of the period.

Thus, placed against and alongside Jean Delumeau's numerous studies of the Renaissance, some of which had been translated into English at the time when the pioneers of New Historicism in English Studies started to practise it, the New Historicism launched by Stephen Greenblatt and practised by his followers might have had its critical mighty opposite. It might also not sound all that new as well. As a twentieth-century French historian of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Delumeau had already been a new historicist of a kind when the New Historicists, led by Greenblatt, arrived on the scene. In his books *Le péché et la peur: la culpabilisation en Occident, XIII^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1983; translated as *Sin and Fear: the Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th centuries*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) and *La peur en Occident, XIV^e–XVIII^e siècles: une cité assiégée* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), which we can render as "Fear in the West, 14th–18th centuries: a city besieged," and in his writing about Melancholy in the Renaissance, the civilization of the Renaissance, and his new view of Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation from Luther to Voltaire, Delumeau, working in the tradition of Georges Lefebvre's 1932 history of great fear caused by the French Revolution, by going back in time, had been synthesizing a large body of historical evidence from the long early modern period into a mode of reading that is similar in approach and narrative strategy to New Historicism. Delumeau's goal is a revisionist reading of the Renaissance interiority, agency, and affect through fear and religious control. He would not have offered the theoretical frame that New Historicism took from Foucault, White, and Geertz, but he would have provided a model of historical analysis akin to that of New Historicism. Braudel's influence on New Historicism, Parvini writes, "is indirect, diffuse, and very seldom, if ever, acknowledged" (13). Delumeau's influence, alas, is not registered. Yet, the world of some of Delumeau's books that are particularly close to New Historicist patterns of historical narrative is also the world of Shakespeare's plays, and so the affiliation between the text and the textual scholarship brought into the critical act would have correlated more. And since Delumeau's subjects most often come from the Western and North-Western Renaissance, New Historicism, if it had leaned on Delumeau's historiography by expanding it to the English material, would have produced a field of comparative historiographic exactness and a proto-new historicist alterity against which to gauge its own new strategies, employed on

reading the English material. Against the background of such New Historicism historiography, Shakespeare might have offered other critical opportunities.

After chapter 1, in which he puts in historiographic context Catherine Gallagher and Greenblatt's *Practising New Historicism*, by way of reading Braudel, Foucault, and Elton, Parvini moves, in chapter 2, to a discussion of a number of historicist studies "written between 1940s and 1970s that prefigure new historicism" (35) between E. M. W. Tillyard and Greenblatt. In a way, this too is a chapter that maps out the work of the progenitors of the new historicist critics of Shakespeare. After the foregrounding of New Historicism in the "heterodoxy and textuality of history" (52), chapter 3 engages, competently and incisively, with the topics of power, containment, and cultural poetics as they are developed in books by a selection of key New Historicists of the founding generation—Leonard Tannenhause, Jonathan Goldberg, Louis Montrose, Steven Mullaney, Stephen Greenblatt—especially comparing and contrasting their exploration of Shakespeare's England and England's shaping of the Shakespearean texts. All along, Parvini makes sure that his guiding idea—that "the earliest new historicist works fell foul" (74) of a simplified reading of Foucault—resonates clearly, as it does, among his readers.

Chapter 4 is a case study of "New Historicism in Practice," devoted to a reading of *Measure for Measure*—a play that is explicitly concerned with power and justice, two of New Historicism's key topics. The case study, too, is metacritical. In this chapter, as throughout the book, Parvini is a critic of various methodological, critical, and interpretative gaps, misjudgments, and critical inflations that New Historicism brought to Shakespeare. It is as if New Historicists read Shakespeare against the grain of his time and text, rather than followed the deep grain of the text. Contextual stories mined from the archive are read "off" Shakespeare, and plays collapse (Parvini's word, 94) different aspects of the play into one: political, i.e., the force that New Historicism sees as driving the history dramatized in Shakespeare.

In chapter 5, Parvini reviews the often uneasy intersection of New Historicism and feminism; in chapter 6, he evaluates "the opponents" (116) of New Historicism, who advocate, among other points, a return to a literary, rather than extraliterary, and not homogenizing, engagement with Shakespeare. The final chapter promotes the everyday as one of the most productive legacies of New Historicism.

Parvini writes directly, passionately, and engagingly. In the first instance, this is not a book about what New Historicism did with, and to, Shakespeare; but mostly about what it could have done but did not. It is also not a book that answers fully the question of what prompted, or conditioned, the emergence of New Historicism at the time when it appeared. A book surveying the writing that “sounded the death knell” (134) for New Historicism is itself one such book. It does not come too late, even though New Historicism has long been over (or so it seems), but it is a nicely woven tapestry of many such critiques, and thus useful to anyone, students and scholars, in need of a quick reference guide to the gist of critique of New Historicism.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary's University, Halifax

Pattenden, Miles.

Electing the Pope in Early Modern Italy, 1450–1700.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi, 309 + 5 figures, 12 tables. ISBN 978-0-1987-9744-9 (hardcover) US\$112.50.

This new study offers far more than its title suggests. While this book explores how popes were elected in early modern Italy, it will be remembered more for its discussion of “the problems selection by election created for the cardinals and others who invested in the papacy as an institution” (1). This wider focus sets the study apart from previous conclave chronicles of scrutiny tallies and negotiations in the latrines. In this instance, contextualizing the conclave involves a much larger discussion of the practices, expectations, and cultural values that Europeans (and especially Italians) connected with the papacy shared through the early modern period.

Chapters 1–3 set the preparation for, experience of, and dangers involved in conclave clearly before the reader. While the volume's discussion begins with the flurry of preparations made in Rome and elsewhere for conclave voting, it soon becomes a meditation on the political and constitutional nature of the papacy. Pattenden's purpose is to explore how the elective, cyclical, and nepotistic nature of the Holy See impacted the actions of its stakeholders and affected its health, wealth, and governance. At its core, this book offers a broad