

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Keymer, Thomas, ed. Prose Fiction in English from the Origins of Print to 1750

Joshua J. McEvilla

Volume 42, Number 4, Fall 2019

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068605ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068605ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McEvilla, J. (2019). Review of [Keymer, Thomas, ed. Prose Fiction in English from the Origins of Print to 1750]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 235–238. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068605ar>

that describes both the prose and drama set in the region, and that gives *Twelfth Night* new meaning. The key research question, “how did Shakespeare draw on the wealth of information about Illyria that complemented his picture of early modern Europe?” was largely answered in the previous chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the strongest argument so far that Shakespeare’s Adriatic plays and the non-Shakespearean Adriatic prose romance belong both to English literature but also to the early modern heritage of Illyria narrated in European accounts across time. The argument about Illyria being the conduit for the flow of Christian ideas from the eastern Mediterranean to the West puts *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Cymbeline* at the centre of this cultural transmission.

The Coda is a reminder of Illyria’s borderland existence as a crucial element in defining European relationships with the world beyond. In this theoretically sophisticated chapter, in which current cultural and critical theories intersect with the movement of people from beyond the historical Illyrian space(s) into Europe, Puljcan Juric implicitly claims urgency for her book, and makes us aware that Illyria mattered to Shakespeare just as it has continued to matter up to the present moment. The variety and coverage of the historical sources and data change the paradigm of early modern Mediterranean studies in the English context; many are original in the sense that they are brought into the conversation with English sources and English historiography for the first time. There, too, lies the originality and freshness of this elegantly written book.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Keymer, Thomas, ed.

Prose Fiction in English from the Origins of Print to 1750.

The Oxford History of the Novel in English 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxxiv, 637 + 17 ill, 1 table. ISBN 978-0-19-958003-3 (hardcover) US\$125.

Chronologically, *Prose Fiction in English from the Origins of Print to 1750* comes first in the series The Oxford History of the Novel in English (12 volumes, 2011–2019). As the entry volume of the series, it is a collection of thirty-five

broadly themed essays with a general introduction by senior scholar Thomas Keymer. It carries the heavy task of condensing into an easily readable format the commercial and material concerns from “the importation of printing technology into England by William Caxton,” circa 1476, to Samuel Johnson’s pronouncement of a new type of fiction in *The Rambler* (March 1750) (xvii). Reacting principally to Ian Watt’s much-contested *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Keymer nods at the earlier, pioneering works of William Dunlop (*The History of Fiction*, 1814) and Ernest Baker (*The History of the English Novel*, 1924–39); he frames the beginnings of a new approach towards the transnationalization and re-classification of “the novel in English” vs “the English novel” (xv).

Paul Baines’s “Pornography and the Novel” (417–34) is a stand-out piece not only for its subject matter relative to previous histories of the novel but for its wide-scoping research. Visual storytelling, mostly of a limited function in earlier essays, takes centre stage through Baines’s reading of the Hogarth diptych “Before and After” (1736), plates 1 and 2 (418–19). As a pretext to legitimizing “Early Fiction by Women”—works by “the fair triumvirate of wit” Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Eliza Haywood—Baines queries the problematic ellipses between the scenes presented to the viewer. In the first scene, a rake begs a damsel (presumably for sex), and in the second, the damsel begs the rake (presumably for atonement in the form of a marriage proposal); relatedly, books as varied as “Rochesters Poems” and “The Practice of Piety” lay tucked away in a dresser drawer (417). Because the sex act is “invisible, mentally offstage,” Baines asks to what extent all early fiction writing by women was inferred to be “pornography” (420). He reminds the reader of the etymological, Greek roots of “porno” (whore) and “graph” (to write). While re-evaluating the overtly sexualized, objectified person of the “authoress,” Baines amusingly packs together titillating anecdotes. He discusses Samuel Pepys’s reading and then burning of the female-narrated *L’Ecole des Filles* (1655) (420–21); the “real-life political scandal and trial” behind Behn’s *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684–87) (421–22); and the gender-inverted, voyeuristic qualities of a scene from Manley’s *The New Atlantis* (1709) (422–23).

Several essays should be of interest to historians of early English drama and theatrical authorship. Essays such as Tiffany Stern’s “Nashe and Satire” (180–95) adduce cleverly a kind of shared resistance to definition across the fertile, multifaceted creations of a single writer. Now best remembered for his “prototype novel” *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), Thomas Nashe frequently

crafted prose of a markedly theatrical quality (such as with prologues and epilogues) (187). His multifarious interactions as a London writer include a dedication to “Tarlton’s successor, the clown William Kemp” (*An Almond for a Parrot*, 1590); a play he wrote for private performance, *Summer’s Last Will and Testament* (ca. 1582); and his name as a contributor on Marlowe’s posthumously printed *Dido Queen of Carthage* (ca. 1587–93) (186). Studying the origins of “the novel” in relation to the generic distinctions of prose is far more complicated than examining the formal categories of theatrical authorship. Early writers of prose, like Nashe, chose to defy the categorical limits of early classical styles of writing.

Attention to the early years of the novel casts light on the spread of generic possibility through translated texts. Robert H. F. Carver declares in his richly pedagogical essay, “English Fiction and the Ancient Novel” (123–45), that the “accolade of ‘first novel printed in English’ belongs to William Adlington’s translation of *The Golden Asse* (1566)” (130). Certainly, *The Golden Asse*, an extended meditation on selfhood from ancient Greece, does serve to validate Carver’s contention: “There are compelling reasons to consider the emergence of novelistic texts from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries in light of [an] earlier efflorescence of prose fiction” (123). Comparatively, Brean Hammond, in “Cervantes, Anti-Romance, and the Novella” (277–93), makes a case for *Don Quixote* as an early entrant of the genre. She succeeds as much for what remains unsaid as for what rises to the surface. She asserts the intertextual requirements of “anti-romance” as a genre—“Books, in short, are made of other books” (278). In a sense, the psychological manifestations of Cervantes’s “Quixote” render the mind visible, thereby making Quixotic adventures akin to Defoe-esque internal monologue.

Parts of the book recognize the explosion of interest in recent years in book history and bibliography. Cathy Shrank’s essay, “Cross-Sections (1): 1516–1520” (46–54), highlights the practical difficulties of “survival rates” that complicate modern understandings of early “novel-like” texts. Six of the ten examples in her chapter come from the same sixteenth-century *Sammelband*: “Their survival is owed entirely to the fact they were bound into a larger and therefore more robust volume which was only dismantled in the eighteenth century” (46). Lori Humphrey Newcomb, in “Cross-Sections (2): 1596–1600” (55–72), considers briefly the largely-unexplored branding feature of the titular author-name: “In the 1599 edition of *Menaphon*, the running title [originally

“The reports of the Shepheards”] was changed to ‘Greenes Arcadia,’ presumably in an attempt to lift Greene to Sidney’s level of deceased eminence. By 1610 the phrase ‘Greenes Arcadia’ had become the book’s whole title” (69).

In the general editor’s preface to the series, Patrick Parrinder writes, “At a time when new technologies are challenging the dominance of the printed book and when the novel’s ‘great tradition’ is sometimes said to have foundered, [I] believe that the *Oxford History* will stand out as a record of the extraordinary adaptability and resilience of the novel in English” (xvi). The statement alludes to a famous instance of definition. At the sight of a sinking ship, amid cries of fear from his fellow shipmates, Robinson Crusoe admits, “It was my advantage in one respect, that I did not know what they meant by *founder*” (1719 ed., 12, my italics). By tracing the early beginnings of “the novel” within an age of “prose fiction,” Keymer and his authors make strides to place what is “the novel” within a larger, malleable framework of writing styles, one that can be adapted to the pressures of new media.

JOSHUA J. MCEVILLA

University of Toronto

Lake, Peter.

How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 688. ISBN 978-0-300-22271-5 (hardcover) US\$37.50.

Peter Lake’s voluminous book about the political context of Shakespeare’s history plays is a product of reading a large body of Catholic texts and documents against some documents of the English Reformation. The book’s focus is a discussion of most of the “interesting and important” elements of the “politics and political culture of the 1590s” (xi). These elements include the nature of Englishness as it was represented and tested in this crucial decade: the achievement and instruments of operation during the Elizabethan regime. Study of the politics of the 1590s—as Lake demonstrates in impressive detail and with nuanced interpretation—involves an analysis of rebellion, bastardy, usurpation, Parliament, providence, predestination, clerical conspiracy, political tyranny