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Baker, David J., and Patricia Palmer, eds. Early Modern Criticism in a Time of Crisis. Other

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Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques

Baker, David J., and Patricia Palmer, eds.

Early Modern Criticism in a Time of Crisis. Other.

Santa Barbara, CA: EMC Imprint, 2022. Accessed 1 November 2022.

emctc.tome.press.

Early Modern Criticism in a Time of Crisis is a striking digital text that explores the somewhat fraught relationship between early modern studies as a discipline and modernity's seemingly constant barrage of current "crises." The ethos of the collection is rooted in the desire to find a way for early modern studies to help facilitate a more cohesive discussion of a world currently in crisis (Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and global warming all figure largely in the framing of the various arguments contained within the volume). In their introduction, David Baker and Patricia Palmer correctly take to task scores of early modern scholars for failing to develop a resonance with modernity in their work, asking pointedly, "What was it to be an early modernist amid the convulsions of endgame, last-days modernity, living and working on long-dead letters while knowing what we think we know?" This question provides significant framing for the eight essays that follow. In the introduction to the project, Baker and Palmer inform their readers that the volume will undertake the term "crisis" in a broader sense than perhaps is expected. While our modern sensibilities locate crisis in a moment of dire circumstances, the editors here also embrace the more ancient medical meaning of the term, indicating a moment wherein action is required to ensure the improvement of the patient. As a result, the volume not only considers early modern scholarship as a means of grappling with very modern crises but also frames ways in which intervention could be taken in the field of early modern studies to make the work produced there more agile, relevant, and useful.

The text is divided into three major sections, each tackling some connection between the broad term "crisis" and early modern scholarship. The first section addresses Shakespeare's cultural deployment in current crises, with essays from David J. Baker, Sally Barnden, and Mary Learner parsing the ways in which Shakespeare criticism and scholarship can speak to modern crises. Baker

and Barnden elucidate the role of Shakespearean rhetoric in the turbulent political environments surrounding Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, while Learner deftly posits Iago's lying in *Othello* through the lens of memetics and the deployment of "fake news."

The second section, which feels slightly disjointed from the remainder of the collection, usefully analyzes various "crisis points" in early modern studies. Katherine Landers, Andrew Hadfield, and Lucy Munro in turn address gaps in early modern critical studies, such as connections between gender and class in the period, noting that discussions of class are often harder to identify in early modern texts than they are in modernity. Landers's essay probes the use of digitized woodcuts and their accompanying broadside ballads to determine connections between class and gender in the mid-seventeenth century. Hadfield's essay posits ways that early modern studies provide useful interlocation between modern issues surrounding class and political influence (or the lack thereof) through texts such as *Arden of Faversham* and *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. Munro's work on "political immaturity" features analysis of a little-known seventeenth-century author, the young Rachel Fane (1613–80), as a means of arguing for scholars of the period to spend more time exploring the ideas of young voices from the era.

The final section devotes itself to ways in which early modern studies might intercede in current rhetoric surrounding crises. Willy Maley offers, by way of an exploration of his own decades-long career in early modern studies, the caution that while schools of literary studies are always at pains to address crises to assert their relevance, it is important that such work is meaningfully addressing "longstanding causes of crises," such as imperialism, lest it devolve into "careless talk." Patricia Palmer closes this section with a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the complacency that accompanies some fields of literary studies wherein we find our own writings to be acts of political criticism when they are often no such thing. As a resolution to this lack, Palmer explores Ireland's fraught political past in the context of the MACMORRIS project, where research into early modern Ireland "map[s] research about the past onto the cartography of the present." Maley's and Palmer's essays in this last section work together well, both to caution that early modern studies not insulate itself from the concerns that continue to challenge the world as well as to showcase projects (such as MACMORRIS) that are meaningfully doing that precise work.

Besides the scholarly content contained within, navigating the text itself is a smooth and engaging experience. Readers can navigate quickly between the essays using the drop-down, hyperlinked menu on the left-hand side of the screen. If read in order, the current essay remains on the screen, easily navigated by scrolling up or down, while links to the previous and next essays appear when the mouse scrolls over the drop-down menu. A few of the essays have retained their original works cited lists at the end, but all the essays make use of hyperlinked sources; hovering on the in-text number assigned to the respective endnote conjures up the citation information, making skipping to the bottom of the essay or the end of the volume unnecessary. At the time of this review, the only notable issue pertaining to citation in the volume stems from a lack of access to a referenced Digital Renaissance Editions for Munro's critical companion to the works of Rachel Fane (the editors of the volume do helpfully note that that edition is forthcoming and that the link will be available as soon as that work is complete).

On the other hand, while one misses Munro's edition of Fane at present, the fluidity of the volume is one of the highlights, since it allows for the amendment and expansion of the essays as new information comes to light. David J. Barker notes specifically at the end of his exploration of Brexit politics and Shakespearean rhetoric that his essay can only be as complete as Brexit itself is, encouraging continued discussion via email and promising to add to the work as new thoughts emerge. This aspect of open-endedness adds an important simulacrum of scholarship itself—as we continue to learn and think, ideas change. So may the essays in this volume, given its novel format. One of the more engaging aspects of the text is that the essays themselves are accompanied, some more so than others, with lush images illustrative of their early modern and modern contexts. This allows the reader access to early modern images that form the basis of the authors' arguments, as well as striking visual evidence of their modern applicability. (One notable example is a picture of former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson staring directly into the camera as he gobbles ice cream adorned with small Union Jack and St. George flags in Munro's essay addressing "political immaturity.")

In general, this volume does some important work by coalescing around questions of the relevance of early modern studies in a modern world facing so many challenges. It is a relatively "slim" anthology, making it necessarily precise in getting to the point. The essays are rigorous in their scholarship while

at the same time developing a tonal intimacy that belies the authors' personal passions for early modern studies and their desire for its continued survival and relevance. The introductory essay includes photos of the editors, Patricia Palmer and David J. Baker, lending a sense of familiarity to the volume (I found myself searching for similar author photos in the other essays, but found none). One critique I might levy against the anthology is that while the specter of race/racism is present in the essays that address Brexit, discourse surrounding race is only concretely present in Learner's excellent discussion of Iago's memetic qualities in disparaging Othello. The lack of focus on the role that racism and xenophobia played in the UK's vote to depart from the European Union in several essays that devote time to Brexit as both a crisis and a crisis point fit for intervention by early modernists is disappointing, especially given how pre-modern race studies have figured so largely in the field both as a crisis and a point of intervention in recent years. The work done by the individual authors need not have been altered to accommodate this. The inclusion of a more cohesive discussion of the role of race in early modern studies at present in perhaps the introduction or Palmer's "Coda," which closes the volume, or even the addition of another essay would have sufficed.

The anthology itself will likely prove useful and engaging both to incoming graduate students desirous of a sense of the current stakes in early modern scholarship, as well as for those seasoned scholars interested in innovating their own approaches to engaging their work with modern conversations. Furthermore, I think that the presentation of the arguments in an adaptable, changeable format that can grow and expand at the will of the editors and individual authors provides an interesting alternative to the more fixed nature of a printed volume. The questions and views presented by this collection of authors are ones that are significant to the continued survival and relevance of the field. In short, what does it mean to study current crises through the lens of early modernity, and can we recognize the crises in our field and act on them before it is too late?

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