

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Palfrey, Simon. Poor Tom: Living King Lear

Jeremy Lopez

Volume 38, numéro 3, été 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087418ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i3.26166>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lopez, J. (2015). Compte rendu de [Palfrey, Simon. Poor Tom: Living King Lear]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(3), 220–222.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i3.26166>

© 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, 2015

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

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

Palfrey, Simon.

Poor Tom: Living King Lear.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-0-226-15064-2 (hardcover) \$35.

This is a really good, frustrating book. It is a guided tour of *King Lear* where our eye—sometimes with the help of a microscope, sometimes a telescope, and sometimes with no aid whatsoever—is constantly trained on the figure of Edgar-Tom. It is also an ambitious experiment in criticism. The structure of the argument is not linear, but rather braided. Even-numbered chapters, called “scenes,” move through the play in chronological order, tracing Edgar-Tom’s career, “trying to draw out what might be happening” (6). Odd-numbered chapters, called “interludes,” “meditate on possibilities—philosophical, theological, political—generated by the play action” (6). Palfrey suggests that the scenes ought to be read one after the other, while the interludes can be read in any order. The book contains many other formal experiments as well: chapters consisting of lists, or written as dialogue, or dividing a scene into component “blocks,” etc. Different readers will no doubt have different levels of tolerance for this deliberately disorienting approach. I found it both salutary and exhilarating, even in those moments when I also felt that I was being manipulated. I was always convinced that Palfrey was, as his subtitle announces, “living *King Lear*,” and I was always interested to understand what that meant.

The vagueness of the language in the passages (quoted above) where Palfrey describes the aims of *Poor Tom* is indicative of both what is good and what is frustrating about the book. Palfrey’s approach to *Lear* is not driven by any agenda but a formal one: he acknowledges from the outset that it is hard to figure out “what might be happening” in the play, and he is willing to show his critical self in the process of being puzzled, experiencing revelation, changing his mind, and so forth. He also acknowledges, and embraces, the fact that both the motivation and the results of literary criticism are frequently extra-textual. At the end of chapter 11, “History Man,” Palfrey finds himself surprisingly, self-consciously, even a little doubtfully, but with increasing commitment, using *Lear* and its bedlam beggar as figures, or perhaps as interlocutors, for the experience of the Holocaust. It is a dangerous moment, like so many moments in *Lear* itself, where the reader feels the need to pass a judgment but is uncertain

on whom the judgment should be passed, and according to what law. Is Palfrey being merely sensationalist and exploitive? Do I reveal my own intellectual provincialism in resisting his argument? *Does* the play have anything to say to or about the Holocaust? If so, does it say what Palfrey says it does, and if not, how do *I* know what it is? Shakespeare criticism does not often so fully involve the reader in the author's interpretive process. The payoff here and elsewhere is considerable. And the structural device of the interlude chapters relieves both author's and reader's burden just a bit: together we can admit that criticism is the art of *attempting* to describe a work's form and effects—and that attempts do sometimes fail.

Flexibility and productive contingency are, then, some of the benefits of Palfrey's open-ended approach. Its main downside, somewhat paradoxically, is predictability. What might be happening, in the largest sense, in *King Lear*? According to this book, everything and also nothing. What possibilities are generated by the play's action? According to this book, all possibilities; yet all possibilities are also, in some sense, negated. Extravagant though they may be, these are actually familiar and usual claims about the entire Shakespeare corpus—and perhaps especially about *Lear*. That Shakespeare contained and anticipated all possible worlds is a fundamental assumption of literary criticism since the Romantic period. It may have gone underground a bit since the 1960s, but it still animates the vast enterprise of Shakespeare criticism. Palfrey's footnotes and index provide a roll-call of eminent critics and theorists, but one who is surprisingly absent is Charles Lamb, whose 1810–11 essay on *Lear* is akin to *Poor Tom* in both style and substance. I expect that Palfrey would embrace the comparison to Lamb, and that he would be happy to think of his book as an inheritor of the adventurous Romantic spirit. Still, Lamb's claim that "*Lear* is essentially impossible to be represented on the stage" and Palfrey's that "*King Lear* is perhaps the most fierce and moving play ever written" (dust jacket) are the same kind of gesture and beg the same kinds of questions. Some of Palfrey's adventurous meditations might have found more stable ground if he had articulated an argument that, finally, gave *Lear* a particular identity independent of Shakespeare's all-encompassing greatness.

This is not to say that *Poor Tom* lacks engagement with the particularities of *Lear*'s language and form. Palfrey is as dazzling a close reader as he is a prose stylist, and these two gifts often complement each other to produce elegant, economical, revelatory interpretations: of *Lear*'s love-test in the opening scene

(51); of the extraordinarily fluid series of registers and idioms in which Edgar-Tom speaks (chapter 8, “Tom’s Voices,” and chapter 10, “Tom’s Places”); of the scene in which Edgar-Tom leads the blinded Gloucester (chapter 14, “Shattered Genealogy”); and of the duel between Edgar and Edmund (221–24). Because of readings like this, I will put *Lear* on my undergraduate syllabus next year for the first time since I can’t remember when. I always avoid the play because I feel like students don’t get it and I don’t know how to tell them what they are supposed to get. *Poor Tom* has changed this; it has given me a provocative way of thinking about *Lear*, and an exciting, challenging model for reading it (to follow and to resist) which I did not have before.

JEREMY LOPEZ

University of Toronto

Riche, Barnabe.

The Adventures of Brusanus, Prince of Hungaria (1592).

Ed. with intro. and annotations by Joseph Khoury. Publications of the Barnabe Riche Society. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014. Pp. 383. ISBN 978-0-7727-2144-0 (paperback) \$28.

The number of pages listed above is misleading, as most of the pages in this edition of Barnabe Riche’s very obscure *Brusanus, Prince of Hungaria* are taken up by Joseph Khoury’s introduction. The tale itself is relatively short—certainly by the standards of some of the most famous Renaissance prose narratives—but it is remarkable for its variety. Khoury’s thorough and perceptive introduction shows us exactly how rich Riche’s tale is. Perhaps most valuably, while Khoury very successfully introduces the story and places it in a number of contexts, he leaves a great deal of scope for future scholars. *Brusanus* is an interesting story that deserves to be better known.

Much of the text’s inclusive character can be found in its generic variety. As Khoury points out, the work can be classified in a number of ways: it is a narrative of male friendship, a love story, a text in the mirror for princes tradition, and an entry in the *querelle des femmes*, to name only the most obvious generic labels that could be applied to this tale. As well, Riche’s text has considerable stylistic variety, changing from a very skilful pastiche of euphuism to