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Studies of the nature of representation in the early modern period are less common than they ought to be, and there is still much to be learned about the relationship between Parliament and the public, and between individual members of Parliament and constituents. One way of rectifying this gap in the scholarship would involve extensive archival research among bitty and scattered sources, and a mixture of detailed case studies and synthetic analyses. Another approach involves the kind of interdisciplinarity in this fascinating and stimulating, if perhaps not entirely successful, book. Oliver Arnold seeks to supplement historical evidence regarding early modern representative theory and practice with analysis of William Shakespeare’s plays, as well as consideration of the nature of Renaissance theater and performance. Although he is hardly the first to recognize that the Bard demonstrated an interest in contemporary political life, his is surely the most detailed and historically nuanced attempt to distil Shakespearean ideas from such plays, and his book, thus, offers a valuable supplement to the burgeoning body of scholarship that seeks to locate the plays within their contemporary context, in order to understand the debates to which Shakespeare contributed.

At the heart of Arnold’s thesis are three ideas. The first is that a kind of “secular magic” underpinned early modern notions of representation, involving a fiction of popular involvement that belied the reality of effective exclusion, and the ultimate disappearance of the people (p. 4). The second is that Shakespeare was able to see this fiction for what it was, and offer a critique of it in his plays. He did this, according to Arnold, by showing how representatives could become oppressive masters rather than guardians of liberty, and by using certain characters—such as the third citizen of his title, who both recognizes his theoretical power and his inability to exercise it in reality—to “lift the mystifying veil” from people’s eyes for a few moments, and to demonstrate “the fundamental irrationality of representational politics” (p. 219). The third idea is that central to this demystification of representational politics was a contrast between the openness of the theater and the secretive nature of Parliament. Whereas, at places like the Globe, the public could attend and witness discussions of contemporary issues and retain their power of judgment, parliamentary politics was based on attempts to restrict public access and to maintain a secretive grip on the reporting of proceedings. Arnold concludes that political representation was a “tragedy,” because enfranchisement brought powerlessness, while theatrical relations of power were much more obviously democratic (p. 12). Theatrical representation, he contends, was far more radical than political representation: “theatre models elective politics,” and “created a plebeian public sphere in which opinions might be shaped and political effects achieved” (pp. 162, 43).

To substantiate such ideas, Arnold begins by analyzing the nature of parliamentary representation in the early modern period. He draws on contemporary claims that every Englishman was notionally present in the House, and thereby consented to the decisions made in the Commons. At the same time, he highlights the difficulties of gaining access to the Palace of Westminster, the punishment of “strangers,” and the attempts to prevent news of debates from reaching the public. As such, he suggests, “the walls of St. Stephens’ [Chapel] function as a boundary marker of public discourse” (p. 55).

Only after having outlined at some length what he
takes to be the culture of parliamentary representation in theory and practice does Arnold turn to Shakespeare, initially in terms of the first Tetralogy, where Cade is taken to reveal the “contradictions of parliamentary representation,” and then in terms of works regarding Rome, such as Titus Andronicus and The Rape of Lucrece, once again to demonstrate how Shakespeare reveals the “hazards of political trusts” (pp. 98, 112). Although Arnold considers Julius Caesar to be historically inaccurate, he, nevertheless, argues that it is fascinating for revealing a contrast between Caesarism and political representation, which explains why the former was feared by the Tribunes and why it was replaced by Brutus’s representationalism. Arnold then turns to Coriolanus, which he places in the context of the disputed corporation politics of Warwick in the late sixteenth century, not least in terms of secrecy and appeals to the lower orders at the time of parliamentary elections. Shakespeare was surely aware of events in Warwick, and Arnold suggests that Shakespeare may have taken from such knowledge a distrust of representation, and a sense that contested elections merely heightened the contrast between the theory of electoral enfranchisement and the reality of representational disempowerment. In Arnold’s account of the play, Shakespeare depicts Coriolanus as a Cecil-like opponent of public politics, and demonstrates that his banishment merely revealed the extent to which the people had been tamed by representation, as at least one of the characters recognizes.

Fascinating and clever though Arnold’s thesis clearly is, any number of problems can be identified with the book. Stylistically, it sometimes lacks focus and organizational clarity, which results in a tendency to repeat key arguments in a way that sometimes feels hectoring, and that perhaps springs from a failure to set out the project’s goals and strategy in a straightforward way. It remains unclear whether we are learning about Parliament and representation from Shakespeare, or about Shakespeare from Parliament and representation. In terms of substance, Arnold’s book might represent a more successful work of literary criticism than of historical analysis. He can certainly be accused of being rather less critical of early modern theater than of Parliament. He assumes too readily that the former was a genuinely accessible public, and even a plebeian place, where the audience readily understood all of the issues and topical references, and argues too forcefully that Parliament by contrast was a closed world. On the latter, there is only so much that can be garnered from the kinds of sources to which Arnold refers—official journals and parliamentary diaries—and every reason to suspect that punishment of strangers and complaints about the reporting of debates actually reflected a surprising degree of openness and accessibility, rather than the opposite. Indeed, there is a growing body of scholarship that seeks to demonstrate how much information regarding parliamentary proceedings was available to the public and how easy it was to gain access to the corridors of power, topics that need to be engaged with more closely.[1] In pointing out the problem with voting, which he describes as a “moment of confusion” rather than a sign of genuine empowerment, Arnold also fails to consider the possibility that elections could be used as a way of passing judgment on parliamentary performance, something that contemporaries were coming to recognize, albeit rather slowly and fitfully (p. 220).

Ultimately, it is possible to argue that what is at times a fairly passionate critique of representative politics is misdirected. Arnold professes not to be chastising the early modern world for failing to live up to modern standards, but this surely represents disillusionment with modernity rather than a refusal to criticize and reject the practices of the past, which are described as “shocking,” “uniquely strange,” and “extraordinarily inappropriate for an institution that claimed to be empowered by the people” (p. 68). But the nature of the problem with representation must surely relate to the need to make it work in a better rather than a worse fashion, rather than to the intrinsic certainty that the people cannot be present in Parliament all of the time. There may have been a fiction at the heart of the language of representation in the sixteenth century, but such fictions are not always problematic; rather they help to ensure that institutions can function. The problem of early modern representation was one of degree, in terms of the franchise, secrecy, access, influence, and accountability, and it needs to be recognized more fully than Arnold presents it. That part of the story of the early modern period is about how such issues became contested and how such debates became rather noisier, even if not necessarily perfectly clear.

Nevertheless, this preoccupation with the fiction of representation (what Arnold styles its “fundamental irrationality”), rather than with its intrinsically contested nature, is a shame rather than a disaster. The book provides some needed and very stimulating ideas and evidence with which to develop scholarly analysis of the ways in which contemporaries thought about parliamentary representation, and about the problems involved in making such a system both meaningful and practicable.
It also makes a convincing case regarding the awareness that literary giants, such as Shakespeare, had of such issues, and their willingness to use plays as a means of contributing to contemporary political discourse.

Note

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