

Book Review

Pettegree, Jane. *Foreign and Native on the English Stage, 1588-1611: Metaphor and National Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 248 pp. \$85.00.



For those of us interested in the ways that writers worked to negotiate and shape England's cultural identity during the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods, there's lots to like about Jane Pettegree's new book, *Foreign and Native on the English Stage, 1588-1611*. Pettegree gives us three case studies, each exploring the complex functioning of a particular figure or "metaphoric complex" closely linked, for English writers, with ideas about the "native" and the "foreign." Her study reaches beyond the confines of English drama, looking to a rich array of nondramatic sources and, where appropriate, continental analogues as a way to understand how English writers adapted foreign works or figures for their own purposes. This self-conscious use of continental literature to contextualize English writing about nationhood is one of the strengths of Pettegree's book; it is also indicative of the multiple levels at which ideas of the "foreign" and the "native" inform this study. Pettegree's integration of foreign works—from the tragedies of Jodelle and Garnier to the Italian works that passed through the London print shop of Richard Field—fills an important scholarly gap by helping us to understand what was uniquely "English" about the poetics of English nationhood.

A great many *topoi* are open to the kind of work that Pettegree does, but it is clear from the start that the three figures or "topographies" at the center of her study have been carefully chosen: first, she examines the exotic (and ever alluring) figure of Cleopatra; then, the familiar county of Kent, a space that epitomized, at key moments, the "local" and the "national" in English writing. Finally, she turns to that "transnational imagined community" (119), Christendom, a concept with special

significance in the early history of the modern nation state, and by far “the most emotive and actively contested” (119) of these “cultural keywords” for English writers and audiences in the post-Reformation period. As Pettegree’s book amply demonstrates, it makes good sense to study “Kent” and “Christendom” together—not least because of their strong association (in the commonplace formulation “Kent and Christendom”) for sixteenth-century English writers. If there is an outlier here, it’s Cleopatra, who seems, at first, to bear little relationship to the two other terms. And yet the English literature of the 1590s is full of references to this exotic queen as Elizabeth’s reign drew to an end, and with it the Tudor dynasty. It is Cleopatra’s prominence in the drama of this period, the familiarity of her story, and her indisputable alterity—all the myriad ways that she stands for something “Other” than “Kent and Christendom”—that make her an appropriate choice for this study.

The deconstructive logic of Pettegree’s project determines, to a great extent, the structure of this book, but so does her desire to have each case study culminate “with discussion of a play by Shakespeare” (14), a choice that she defends on account of the playwright’s “unusual capacity to absorb and rework such a wide spectrum of discursive material” and “his centrality to the evolution of English national identity as a literary construct” (14). The three central chapters of Pettegree’s book are long—each between fifty and fifty-five pages—and this allows her to “build up in thick layers what a particular metaphoric complex might have represented to early modern audiences and readers” (10). The result is a dense and nuanced book that will be useful for not only Shakespeare studies but also for those of us interested in the works of Mary Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Lyly, Thomas Heywood, and other Elizabethan and Jacobean writers who contributed, in one way or another, to the project of English nation-building.

The first case study centers on the figure of Cleopatra in French and English dramatic literature, the politics of representing this “foreign” queen in courtly drama from Jodelle and Garnier to Samuel Daniel and Fulke Greville (who reportedly burned his manuscript “for fear it might be associated with Essex’s rebellion in 1601” (44). Plays about Cleopatra seem to proliferate in late sixteenth-century France and especially in England during the final decade of Elizabeth I’s reign and the first decade of James

I's. Pettegree shows how Cleopatra served—positively and negatively—as a figure of self-estrangement for writers on both sides of the Channel, and how, in England, “this version of the exotic self was utilized by an increasingly self-conscious national court culture as a mirror” (11). Her argument culminates in a reading of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* as a work that—in conscious dialogue with this courtly tradition—“holds not a single mirror up to the king, but instead creates a hall of mirrors, holding up multiple, even conflicting, versions of the early Jacobean regime” (51).

Pettegree’s discussion of the complex status of Kent and Kentishness in English writing examines how this “corner of England” was “proverbially embedded in the popular imagination in ways that led contemporaries to see it as ‘the best of’ what England represented and as a liminal space which laid bare the fracture lines running through synecdochal constructions of patriotic identity” (70). Traditionally associated with civility, and idealized in the pastoral writing of Spenser and others, Kent was also identified with the “monstrous” and served, historically, as a site of popular resistance and rebellion. Tracing the conflicting representations of Kentishness through Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, Pettegree covers an impressive range of writing before she concludes, predictably enough, with a reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

The third and final case study, which looks at the troubled notion of “Christendom” in post-Reformation English writing and culminates in a reading of *Cymbeline*, was also, I suspect, the most difficult to write. Of the three terms chosen for her study, this one is the most ubiquitous, appearing across an especially diverse range of Elizabethan and Jacobean writing—from religious and political tracts, pamphlets, and polemical works to histories, romances, novellas, poems and plays. Pettegree’s focus is on the “championing” of Christendom in chivalric romance and on the English stage. While, at times, Pettegree’s argument seems to strain against the sheer volume of available material, she takes us through a series of fascinating digressions—some historical, some literary—as she traces the decline of “a deeply problematic metaphor for English writers” (145). The failure of “Christendom” as a metonym for Protestant England—its increasing estrangement from “native identity” during this period—will require new ways of imagining national or international selves. Taken

together, Pettegree's three case studies offer fresh and useful insight into "the imaginative processes whereby our individual and collective identities are constructed" (182).

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