

Chris Fitter, ed. *Shakespeare and the Politics of Commoners: Digesting the New Social History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp 264. Hardback £55.00. ISBN: 9780198806899.

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In what may prove to be the cornerstone for a revised historical-theoretical approach to Renaissance literature, Chris Fitter's new volume bands together a medley of Shakespearean scholars and social historians to reevaluate and reframe the politics of early modern England. Not wishing to look solely at popular or dominant political and social contexts, as New Historicists have before, Fitter privileges what he sees as the 'politics of commoners', the latter term of which he defines as the marginal yet populous social groups among which Shakespeare himself had grown up, and which comprised the bulk of the audience for which he wrote. By addressing the 'potentially adversarial politics of the wider commons', this collection of essays considers the tensions, revolts, rebellions, and riots that emerged from within the commonality to challenge central government (1). What results is a truly original and theoretically challenging set of perspectives that demonstrate Shakespeare's sensitivity to what Fitter terms 'plebeian culture' and situate a critical popular voice in dialogue with, and often in contention with, the ideologies of the state.

In his introduction, Fitter outlines an argument for plebeian power, from Erasmus's treatise outlining the sway of the populace and Machiavelli's caution against antagonising the sleeping masses, to the incensed commoners responsible for placing Mary on the throne in 1553. Fitter presents this view of early modern politics as far more complex and interactional, the hierarchies of power between government and people more fluid and interdependent, than scholars have previously imagined. Where this plays out on Shakespeare's stage is in what Fitter sees as the dramatist's treatment of rumour and his 'recognition that commoners were both politically avid' and in possession of 'formidable agency' (8). He argues that the plays in performance represent a carnivalesque 'flanking action' that subverts hierarchic authority. In what is to date one of the more convincing challenges to New Historicist theories on containment, Fitter contends that Stephen Greenblatt's model of political subordination under dominant early modern hegemony collapses when one takes into account the multifaceted relationship between crown and commoners. Within this complicated political melange theatre becomes not only a tool of the state but also a forum for social critique.

Having placed New Historicism's critical foundations in doubt, Fitter proposes a 'new social history', its manifesto based on six characteristics. First he advocates a holistic approach to historical research rather than chance cherry-picking of anecdotes to back up theories (17). Second, any meaningful critique of how power is manifested and contested must involve consideration of the social depth of politics encompassing actions and reactions to policy on every level of society; one might describe this as the frictions created at every social stratum. Third, Fitter urges that critics of literature and drama must take into consideration the power possessed by commoners, particularly their influence on politics through resistance and protest. He points out the lack of a standardized form of governance or model for rule in early modern England, and that regional variations in how authority was negotiated and exercised complicate ideas of hegemonic homogeneity. With this in mind the fourth point of Fitter's new social historical approach is to acknowledge that submission and compliance to dominant rule was conditional. Citing Antonio Gramsci's model of power as being constantly in flux, a tug-of-war between the dominant and the submissive, Fitter asserts that power was negotiated, not absolute. Further complicating the balance of power is a fifth point of consideration: the rise of capitalism and its drastic realignment of the classes, ending the medieval systems of power. Fitter's sixth and final principle of new social history draws on historical examples of morality becoming weaponized in the hands of the emergent middle class, and he advocates the need to consider how this would have felt from the plebeian perspective. Thus, this commoners' counter-culture becomes the focus of a new theory, a bottom-to-top perspective on power rather than the more obvious ruler-focused models adopted by New Historicists.

David Rollison, Andy Wood, and Stephen Longstaffe each address different facets of social history in *2 Henry VI*. Rollison's development of the idea of the 'commonweal', a political community focused on the common good, considers the ambiguity of the term and its use as a rallying cry in numerous medieval rebellions. He maintains that Shakespeare's frequent use of the word serves as a reminder of the state's dependence on the populace to justify its existence. Continuing with this theme, Wood takes the civil uprising in *2 Henry VI* and compares it to the social conditions that framed this and similar historical protests against the aristocracy, considering how dramatists translated these conditions to the stage. Finally, Longstaffe looks at the same plebeian uprising in both its Quarto and Folio versions with particular attention to the revisions between the two texts. He posits that the drama that was originally performed was neither of these versions but rather a more subversive dramatic presentation of violent class

rebellion that portrayed Cade less as a tyrant and more as a plausible leader of a righteous cause.

On the subject of war and conscription, Paola Pugliatti looks at the representation of the citizen soldier in several history plays with particular attention to the insurgent attitudes of Shakespeare's cast of commoners, which she argues are in sharp contrast to the prevailing theories on voluntarism. Pugliatti claims that the changing face of war and weaponry would have filtered down into the communities as people witnessed the horrific injuries of returning soldiery, and that this in turn appeared on the stage in the form of doubt and dissent, popular outlooks that did not make it into contemporaneous history books.

The Roman plays receive attention in Markku Peltonen and David Norbrook's essays, which respectively consider the art of rhetoric practiced upon the masses in *Julius Caesar* and the lexicon Shakespeare employed in *Coriolanus*. Drawing on the writings of one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Gabriel Harvey, as an instance of more radical political thought and expression, Peltonen notes that the subversive political insinuations from the narratives of Livy and Machiavelli salt Shakespeare's Roman plays, creating ambiguity, 'doubleness', and political volatility within the performances. He observes, however, that these dramatic uncertainties equally reflected contemporary disaffection amongst England's plebeian populace.

In what becomes one of the most in-depth readings of the character of 'Poor Tom' to date, Chris Fitter begins his essay by noting that Lear's invective over Regan's heartlessness echoes the rhetoric of certain political pamphlets decrying the general hardness of heart towards the impoverished. He claims that, whilst Shakespeare's compassionate depiction of Tom may not be radical, it reflects the populist thought that the privileged few were neglecting their Christian duties towards the poor. In *Poor Tom*, Fitter asserts that Shakespeare created a character who systematically destabilised and 'counter-predicated' the stereotypical itinerant as portrayed by the government as a social threat (230).

What this collection does, eruditely and provocatively, is set the political cat loose among the pigeons. For the past forty years we have seen what has become something of a stalemate develop in the debate between New Historicists and Cultural Materialists over ideas of subversion of authority within Shakespeare's texts and performance, and the containment of any such subversion through state censorship and aristocratic patronage. What Chris Fitter and his contributors manage to do is bring significant historical evidence to bear on this debate and reignite arguments surrounding the politics of power on the early modern stage.

