

**Staging England in the Elizabethan History Play:  
Performing National Identity. Ralf Hertel. Studies in  
Performance and Early Modern Drama. Farnham: Ashgate  
Publishing Limited, 2014. ix + 272 pp. \$119.95. [book  
review]**

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**Published version**

HOPKINS, Lisa (2015). Staging England in the Elizabethan History Play: Performing National Identity. Ralf Hertel. Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. ix + 272 pp. \$119.95. [book review]. Renaissance quarterly, 68 (2), 774-775.

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Ralf Hertel, *Staging England in the Elizabethan History Play: Performing National Identity*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 271+viii pp.

This book promises ‘a novel approach to the political drama of the late Elizabethan period’ informed both by current political theory and performance studies, though it also draws on the New Historicist preference for reading its chosen texts in relation to non-fictional writings of the time in order to answer its question of ‘how ... does the performative art of theatre reflect, contribute to and question the dynamics of the formation of early modern Englishness?’ (1). However, not everything in the book is as fresh as Hertel seems to suppose. The discussion of Macmorris’ ‘what ish my nation’ (4-5) treads very familiar territory, and (like New Historicism) he does not always cover all his scholarly bases, with the result that there are gaps in the bibliography: the discussion of Elizabeth’s adoption of the cult of the Virgin Mary, for instance, is accompanied by a footnote not to Helen Hackett but to the film by Shekhar Kapur (8), and he has no interest in current debates about whether Shakespeare wrote all of the *Henry VI* plays. He thinks it is Henry VI himself who is the ‘blood-bespotted Neapolitan’ (183), though a little research would have informed him that Margaret’s father was the king of Naples and it is thus she who is meant, and it is also a bit of an oddity that for someone interested in performance studies he is strangely fallible on the fine detail of performance history: I have no idea why he thinks Fluellen must have been played by an English actor, and he also supposes that actors in the Elizabethan theatre could enter and exit through the yard (111), with which I think few performance history scholars would concur.

The book is divided into five parts, each of which consists of two chapters, the first exploring an issue in general terms and the second focused on a particular text which is here taken to address that issue. The first pairs territory and *1 Henry IV*; the second history and *Richard III*; the third religion and *King John*; the fourth class and *2 Henry VI*; and the fifth gender and *Edward II* (providing the justification for the claim that the book is about ‘Shakespeare and his contemporaries’ [28]). This means that the plays are treated in isolation rather than as parts of a cycle and gives a flattening and schematic feel to the discussions of individual texts, yoking them strictly to the particular issue under discussion. Moreover the sections are, I think, of variable quality. Sometimes Hertel is intriguing and provocative, as when he argues that chorography and atlases displaced attention from the monarch and privileged the individual reader. He is interesting too on the idea of *Richard III*, which he reads principally

in relation to Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, as a re-enactment (112), and when he discusses the importance of the word 'Now' in *King John* (138). Sometimes, though, he falters. Given that a footnote (49, n. 44) effectively informs us that this is a book in which the word 'men' includes 'women', it is not surprising that the chapter on gender is by some way the weakest, based as it is on the idea that 'History plays such as Marlowe's *Edward II* or Shakespeare's *Richard II*' (such as? name another) can be read as failing to distinguish between sexuality and gender: 'it is as if Marlowe's play was designed as a retort to those facing female rule, as if it were saying: "Look at Edward, he was a man and worse than any woman"', to which I can only reply that this is not what it says to me. Moreover Richard III does not woo 'the young Elizabeth' (207) but woos her mother for her (nor do I believe that either this scene or the wooing of Anne demonstrates female power, as Hertel claims), and I am left unsure whether the remark that 'a cocksure performance is a mode of identity formation associated with masculinity' (211) is a nod to Eagleton (who is however another absence from the bibliography) or a piece of deliberate laddishness. In all, then, I found it a mixed bag.

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