

Political Aesthetics II

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John Higgins's *First parte of the Mirroure for Magistrates* and the Primal Scene of British History

John Higgins begins his 1574 *First part of the mirror for magistrates* with a verse “Induction” in which the poet falls asleep after reading Baldwin’s original *Mirror* and is visited by Morpheus, commanded by Somnus to summon the ancient “*Britayne Peeres*” to appear before Higgins and recount their falls. When the induction concludes, Higgins begins his tragic prosopopoeiae not with Trojan Brute, as the full title of the work leads readers to expect (*The first part . . . from the coming of Brute*), but with Albanact, who relates his father’s *translatio* and orders his dreaming auditor, Higgins, to “penne the same / In stories calde *Albanactae* by name.” In this essay, then, I read Higgins’ *First part* (a popular addition to the *Mirror* project with many reprints in the period), as a literary experiment that turns to the Galfridian legends for its content, while expanding the *Mirror* tragic genre by adopting and adapting Virgilian and Ovidian forms. Higgins thus reinvents legendary British history — he admits in his epistle to the reader that he “was often fayne to vse mine owne simple inuention” to write his narratives — through humanistic literary conventions. In reading this text, I turn to the recent work of philosopher of history F. R. Ankersmit, who, in his 2012 *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, calls for historical representation to be understood through the mimetic logic of aesthetic representation — a twinning of two discursive modes that underpin Higgins authorial position in the *First part* as what Puttenham and Spenser would call “poet historicall.” However, to analyze the interrelation of historical-aesthetic form in Higgins text, I read his *First part* through Ned Lukacher’s literary-theoretical rearticulation of the primal scene, “an intertextual event that displaces the notion of the event from the ground of ontology” (24). My paper thus suggests new ways of approaching British legendary history in the late sixteenth century and its importance to vernacular poetry and the historical imagination.

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“That he and poverty should always kiss”: The New Poet and the Poverty of Aesthetics

This paper will consider how the 16th century “new poetry” anticipates the 21st century “new poor,” building upon not only Jacques Ranciere’s writings on poverty (*The Philosopher and His Poor, The Politics of Aesthetics*) but its early modern anticipation in humanist poetic and rhetorical thought, by Erasmus, Du Bellay, and Marlowe. If a guiding premise of political aesthetics as a field of inquiry has been a certain skepticism toward the Messianism of the theological turn, the category of the “invisible” poor – as opposed to the visible vagrancy and “masterless men” that have typically occupied early modern studies’ attention – is perhaps one name for that concern. In Matthew 26, Christ’s injunction that “you will always have the poor, but you will not always have me” articulates the ever-present, unseen demands of poverty as an alternate space parallel to – rather than subordinate or antithetical to – Messianic time. By comparing early modern biblical treatments of Matthew 26 with references to the poor in humanist poetics, my goal in this short paper will be to suggest that this space is properly that of aesthetics – of the *aesthesis*, or lively space of invention (Du Bellay, *La Deffence et illustration*), at once acknowledged yet foreclosed by the supposed redemption of mimetic verse from its “pitiful ... poor” state (Sidney, *Defence*). Rather than an ideological question of the aesthetics of poverty, this “poverty of aesthetics,” as I call it, offers instead a clue to Marlowe’s perplexing digression on poverty in *Hero and Leander* – a poverty of feeling and sensibility that will “always kiss,” or subtend, the Messianic dilemma of the liberatory value of representation, just as real poverty proves ever-growing, always “new” amidst the global political crises of the 21st century.

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On Not Staging Laertes's Rebellion: *Hamlet's* Political Aesthetics

Shakespeare took on the challenging and controversial task of dramatizing rebellion several times in his career, yet in *Hamlet* he conspicuously refuses to do so. Instead of being represented onstage, Laertes's rebellion is reported by an anonymous messenger. This paper will examine this dramaturgical choice to report rather than represent as an instance of political aesthetics. Following the work of Claude Lefort, I will argue especially that it allows Shakespeare to depict the political constitution of Laertes's followers as indeterminate. The paper will examine too the relationship between the semantic and extra-semantic content of the messenger's report itself, focusing especially its metrics and on its description of the rebellion as a moment of primordial chaos, "antiquity forgot, custom not known" (4.5.105), to suggest that we understand Laertes's rebellion not just as an embarrassing political failure that only further consolidates Claudius's authority, but also as a moment of revolution, a term not usually associated early seventeenth century (and now only debatably with the tumultuous events of the midcentury). By re-assessing the dynamics of novelty and custom within revolution via the form and content of the messenger's speech, this paper ultimately takes up questions of how we periodize - or refuse to periodize - the aesthetic and its political implications.

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Ornithologic Sovereignty: Elizabeth I and the Avian Aesthetics of Political Theology

Queen Elizabeth I's sovereign persona serves as a model that bridges old ways of thinking about the divine body politic and new ways of thinking about animalized, hybridized sovereignty. Early visual and textual iconography of Elizabeth's reign subtly and elegantly create a relationship between the divinity of the body politic and the Christological associations that early moderns made with particular birds. Specifically, Shakespeare's allegorical poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (1601) and Nicholas Hilliard's "Pelican" and "Phoenix" portraits (c. 1575) construct portraiture that highlight avian fantastical self-sacrifice and miraculous rebirth. However, it is Thomas Dekker's metacritical meditation in *Four Birds of Noahs Arke* (1609) that concretizes this network of connections. Dekker utilizes the royal symbols most heavily associated with Elizabeth – dove, eagle, pelican, and phoenix – to theorize a concept of pacific, beatific sovereignty that heralds the queen as a beacon of hope during times of hardship, plague, and economic downturn that made life increasingly difficult throughout her reign. The rhetorical structure of Elizabeth's political theology emphasizes her Christ-like nature through an avian lexicon, and demonstrates points of contiguity between the theo-philosophical understanding of the sovereign structures of early modernity and the burgeoning way in which people were coming to think about nonhuman animal life.

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The Politics of Small Forms: Francis Bacon's *An Example of a Treatise on Universal Justice...by Aphorisms* and *The Maxims of the Common Law*

This paper builds on recent critical interest in the political function of "small forms," a term coined by Rosalie Colie to describe short verse or prose forms such as the emblem, *sententia*, commonplace, maxim, aphorism, axiom, adage, etc. In the first part of the paper, I consider the appeal of small forms and why they attracted both elite and common readers. Next, I examine how the small form's popular appeal was used to advance concrete political agendas. I base my analysis on Francis Bacon's treatises *An Example of a Treatise on Universal Justice or the Fountains of Equity, by Aphorisms* (which completes Book 8 of *De Augmentis Scientiarum*) and *Maxims of the Law*, which was first published in 1630. Despite their thematic kinship, the two treatises are worlds apart in their politics, a difference that is formally underscored. In *Universal Justice...By Aphorisms*, Bacon communicates his reform using a series of logically connected aphorisms (almost a hundred in total). These aphorisms are addressed to a generally learned audience. In contrast, *Maxims of the Law* contains thirty disconnected legal maxims that lack sequential order. They could be re-arranged in a variety of ways. Additionally, the maxims are intelligible only to someone already versed in English jurisprudence—someone like Bacon, who routinely combined common, civil, and Roman

law jurisprudence in his arguments. The comparison of these two texts reveals not only Bacon's rhetorical flexibility—his ability to develop an argument in a form to fit the occasion and the audience—but also, and more importantly, a paradox in Bacon's law reform program itself. Whereas *Universal Justice...By Aphorisms* promotes the idea of “universal justice” and universal comprehension of England's laws (as intimated in the title), a democratic sentiment that illustrated in the lucid, accessible form of the aphorisms, the *Maxims of the Law* reveals Bacon's participation in the discursive customs and rituals of his profession. Thus, the utopian promise of lay participation in the production of legal knowledge announced in *Universal Justice...by Aphorisms* is broken in *Maxims of the Law*. Small forms have the potential to disseminate professional or expert knowledge to lay readers, but that is not the case of Bacon's *Maxims*.

KEYWORDS

Francis Bacon, aesthetics of form, politics of prose forms, legal writing, formalism, aphorism, maxim, adage, essay, law reform, Inns of Court, popularity, prose, genre.

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“More Plotting Yet?” The Political Aesthetics of the Subjunctive in Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*

When characters speak in the first half of Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* about their own political positioning and status as political agents, they speak in the subjunctive. Herod, the tyrant-sovereign of the play, is presumed dead, but the uncertainty about his death thrusts characters into a state of epistemological and political turmoil reflected in their speech patterns. The climate of political and domestic uncertainty, of fractiousness and clandestine political plotting thus disrupt the possibilities for a referential speech that can ground sound political judgment. Furthermore, embedded multi-vocal sonnets and sententious aphorisms rely on a modal logic that constitute a nonmimetic aspect of political discourse and plotting that in turn shapes a new understanding of the historical material of their own contingent political circumstances. But Julia Lupton’s observation – that the drama of the sovereign as the Benjaminian tyrant-martyr gives way to a drama of citizenship that emerges from the sacrifice of heroic ideals – finds its inverse in Cary’s play: Herod’s return at the mid-point of the play forecloses possibilities for civic engagement that his death had opened even as it collapses the possibilities opened by the subjunctive, and he becomes the play’s signal representative of subjunctive indecisiveness. My paper will explore two interrelated problems: first, how the subjunctive in its various forms – hortatory, counterfactual, and speculative – informs how the lyric as an aesthetic form shapes the play’s arguments about sovereign indecision and political dimensions of speech and action; second, given that the topicality of the literary is one of the governing assumptions of closet drama, how does disrupted referentiality of political speech in Cary’s play reflect on the historical stakes of the aesthetic. What are the implications of a lyric subjunctive mode that consistently worries about the denotative functions of speech, its ability to sort through, report, and make evaluative judgments about the contexts that would ground these utterances?

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Jean Bodin, Indivisible Sovereignty, and the Aestheticization of Politics

Jean Bodin is often considered a monarchist, if not an absolutist; he ostensibly invented the notion of indivisible sovereignty in early modernity, an idea that remains relevant to diverse historical readers, from Shakespeare to Schmitt and beyond. Indeed, in the 1576 text of *Les Six Livres de la République* (and every subsequent French edition) Jean Bodin affirms that “A Monarchie is naturall” [*La Monarchie est naturelle*]: “*la Monarchie est la plus seure, veu que la famille, qui est la vraye image de une Republique, ne peut avoir qu’un chef: comme nous avons monstré & que toutes les loix de nature nous guident à la Monarchie*”—or, in Richard Knolles’ English translation, “a Monarchie is the most sure, seeing that a familie which is the true image of a Commonweale can have but one head, that all the lawes of nations guide us unto a Monarchie.” Bodin emphasizes this point in later French editions, that it is monarchy alone that unites sovereign power under a single head. Knolles renders this into English as well, where Bodin asserts that “a pure absolute Monarchie is the surest Commonweale, and without comparison the best of all” [*la Monarchie pure absoluë est la plus seure Republique, & sans comparison la meilleure de toutes*]. But in his own Latin translation of the *Six Livres*, first printed in 1586, Bodin omits these abiding references to nature, the laws of nature, and the tacit turn to absolutism, qualifying the strong language of his earlier French claim. Here Bodin excludes the unambiguous quote—“a pure absolute Monarchie is the surest Commonweale, and without comparison the best of all”—opting instead for a fleeting aesthetic articulation of the sovereign monarch’s beauty [*pulchritudo*], a remarkable authorial emendation that qualifies any claims to natural precedent in Bodin as well as assumptions about the emergence and character of absolutism. In every version Bodin confirms that “all wise Politicians, Philosophers, Divines, and Historiographers have highly commended a Monarchie above all other Commonweales”—again, a testament to history but not necessarily to nature. In the Latin text Bodin exploits these ambiguities in a manner that might anticipate Thomas Hobbes’ artificial sovereign. This paper examines the aesthetic vision of politics that emerges in Bodin’s 1586 Latin edition of the *Six Livres* and challenges historical readers, for whom the Francophone Bodin is often read in isolation, to consider different editions and articulations of sovereign power across his career, for discrete audiences. Moreover, this paper locates Bodin’s Latin articulations of “beautiful” monarchy in an emergent conversation concerning sovereignty and poetics, a conversation that resonated across the French Wars of Religion, the Dutch Revolt, and Elizabethan interventions in Continental affairs. When placed in conversation with his contemporaries, Bodin’s emendations offer concrete evidence that Shakespeare and his contemporaries often understood the power, violence and legitimacy in terms of beauty and poetic form, even if the ends of said projects diverge from Benjaminian diagnoses of fascism and the familiar histories of the aestheticization of politics.

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“Whelked and Waved”: *Lear* and the Space of the World

How can we acknowledge the proto-Kantian sophistication of Shakespeare’s conception of the aesthetic, and especially its capacity to trouble historicizing narratives, even while holding onto its historical and political specificity? A large question, but I’ll try to focus it here in relation to *King Lear*. Out of the contradictions of its fable-like, historic/ahistoric opening, the play stages the emergence and separating out of something like the features of the modern political and subjective field: on the one hand, biopolitical governmentality, on the other, the autonomous and infinite transcendental subject—something on the order of Kantian subjectivity. The at once discrete and illimitable character of each of those twinned spaces poses the question of what horizon they share; in effect, the play’s “modernity” consists in the way it translates the aporias of sovereignty into an incommensurability at the heart of the phenomenal world as such. Such a turn coincides with the shift in early modernity from politics as a function of already given social spaces to space itself becoming a function of the political, which is to say, to the political becoming the problem of its own space. But that horizonless dimension—what I associate with Edgar’s view back up the cliffs of Dover—also marks the untimely appearance of the aesthetic; the political and aesthetic components of the transformation are indissociable. In that regard, the play tells the story of the appearance of political aesthetics as a distinctly early modern phenomenon.

Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*

Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War*

Christopher Pye, *Storm at Sea: Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare*

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Political Aesthetics and Forms of Governmentality in Jonson's *The Alchemist*

The early modern sense of government as an “art” shares with early modern aesthetic a focus on the “constitution of the very space of the social” (*Storm at Sea* 5). The creation and incarnation of social space are preoccupations for both forms of “art.” This paper posits an affinity between the early modern aesthetic and the emergence of what Foucault describes in the lectures of *Security, Territoriality, Population* as an “art of government” (the precursor to modern “governmentality”), insofar as both appear at “the interval between theocentric institutions and the appearance of the formal state” (*Storm at Sea* 5). The art of government emerges in the interstices between the pastoral and the political, just as the aesthetic work negotiates indeterminate boundaries between transcendence and immanence to constitute an autonomous world.

Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) is an ideal work through which to develop the affinity between the aesthetic and the governmental in an early modern context. Set in a misappropriated house in the Blackfriars district of London, the play unfolds in a self-governed sphere singularly fixated on the creative act. Creation as such is allegorized in the art of alchemy, which figures multiple modes of transformation: material, affective, spiritual and social. The strict unities of the play establish it as an autonomous aesthetic world. In this imagined separation from established historical reality, the play reimagines and reformulates the governmental economies of seventeenth century London. Although the play is frequently understood as a satire of nascent capitalism and commodity culture, reading it in terms of aesthetic governmentality reveals dimensions of the play that escape explanation by a cultural materialist paradigm. In the play, alchemy is clearly a material fraud, but when recognized as an art with both aesthetic and governmental implications, it emerges as more than a purely delusional enterprise. As an alchemical laboratory and a site of aesthetic performance, the Blackfriars house becomes the scene of various governmental experiments.

Blackfriars was also the district of the theatre in which *The Alchemist* was likely intended to be first performed, and the Blackfriars setting is frequently discussed in metatheatrical terms: critics often conflate the Blackfriars house with the Blackfriars theatre. While acknowledging this theatrical heritage, I want to emphasize as well the significance of Blackfriars's heterodox present and monastic past as further preexistent elements that the aesthetic enterprise of the play reconfigures in order to constitute a new social world. This vexed religious legacy enables the alchemical burlesque of the play to reimagine the stakes of Reformation-era struggles over civil and religious government. Reading the play in terms of a fuller spectrum of religious and political arts of government illuminates forms of conduct and counter-conduct among its characters that resist the terms of nascent capitalism and liberalism, just as monastic remnants resist full incorporation into reformed urban space.

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“Sweet Caesar’s Wounds’: Citizenship and the Aestheticization of Politics in Shakespeare’s Rome”

In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the feeling of the beautiful is represented as heterogeneous to an understanding that operates according to concepts. As Jacques Rancière has written, “The beautiful is beautiful inasmuch as it is neither an object of knowledge, subordinating sensation to the law of the understanding, nor an object of desire, subordinating reason to the anarchy of sensation” (Rancière 91). Nevertheless an aesthetic judgment remains a judgment: “ ... it still bears this resemblance to the logical judgment, that it may be presupposed to be valid for all men” (Kant, location 738). To paraphrase Lyotard, “singular taste” must be universally communicable, despite the absence of a concept that would lend the judgment authority (Lyotard 168). Hence the interest that Kant’s Analytic has had for efforts to imagine an oppositional and emancipatory politics that recognizes the evacuation of any universal Good from a social formation, while also evading the reduction of politics to pure self-interest.

This context will provide the background for a series of questions that I have regarding Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Though Shakespeare wrote in a very different context, there are some affinities between the Kantian aesthetic problematic (especially in its reformulations by Lyotard and Rancière) and the Renaissance theory of *ut pictura poesis*, specifically in tension between the image’s sensational power to move a viewer without thought, versus the meaning to be derived from or ascribed to that image. In the context of sixteenth-century republican politics, the rape of Lucretia is an obvious example, as in Sir Philip Sidney’s discussion of poesy as a speaking picture, and his use of Lucretia as an example of how the image’s dumb plenitude led, via Brutus’s appropriation, to a narrative series that supported the overthrow of the Roman monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic.

To this I will juxtapose Shakespeare’s far more equivocal consideration of the tension between the image of a violated male body (that of Julius Caesar) and the resultant political chaos that leads to the demise of that republic. Both Brutus and

Antony talk about (and the latter displays) Caesar's body to support a particular politics; but the scene of that display – to the plebs or commons who are an excluded and yet necessary component of Rome's political culture - is also crucial. Using Rancière's redefinition of aesthetics as "the distribution of the sensible," I will examine the rhetorical (and perhaps theatrical) display of Caesar's body in the context of an aesthetic discourse that produces certain masculine bodies as normative and therefore republican – with important consequences for the definition and delimitation of political agency.

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The Sentimental Tourist

Does Rancière's *Aisthesis* have anything to do with Renaissance literature? It is not a simple question to answer. Rancière himself insists that though many sorts of practices and "arts" have existed since there have been human beings, only in the eighteenth century has "Art" designated a specific form of experience (he points to Winckelmann's 1764 *The History of Ancient Art* as the origin). It would be interesting to consider whether something like aisthesis might be said to operate within Renaissance literature: it could an opportunity to rethink the relation of Renaissance literature to Kantian purposiveness. But I want with this paper to take a different approach by thinking more specifically about the function of the Renaissance within the aesthetic regime of the nineteenth century. One reason I'd like to do that is to put back on the table of early modern criticism the entire question of the importance of the nineteenth century, including its aesthetics, for the study of the Renaissance.

My point of departure is Henry James' 1882 essay on Venice. The essay is in part a puff piece written to fill James' perpetually empty pockets. But it is also a careful meditation on the notorious description of Venice by John Ruskin. In *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin celebrated Venetian Gothic architecture as the manifestation of a social community. Rancière, in one of the more remarkable chapters in *Aisthesis*, argues that Ruskin offers nothing less than a solution to the conundrum of art bequeathed by Hegel: "How can an art free to do what it wants regain the power of embodiment of an art expressing the life of a community?" Ruskin's response is: art can be Venetian architecture, a decorative art meant to "shelter and express" the life of the Venetian people. Ruskin's description of social art, argues Rancière, becomes the theoretical model not only for the Arts and Crafts movement but also for twentieth-century German industrial design, an artistic practice eventually short circuited, argues Rancière, by Clement Greenberg's denunciation of kitsch in 1939.

James is, characteristically, more ambivalent. Ruskin is certainly the best thing to read on Venice, he insists, provided that you remember that Ruskin writes like an "angry governess." James' essay is inflected by Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, which rejected Ruskin's celebration of Gothic and his demonization of the Renaissance as narrow moralizing (it might be worth noting that Pater also describes Winckelmann as "the last fruit of the Renaissance"). The Renaissance, for Pater, names a conception of art that maintains the "generous belief that nothing which had ever interested the human mind could wholly lose its vitality." James' essay sits between Ruskin and Pater and tries to reconcile the mastery of Renaissance art, figured in his lavish praise of Tintoretto, with the celebration of the Venetian people. "You don't go into the churches and galleries by way of a change from the streets," insists James; "you go into them because they offer you an exquisite reproduction of the things that surround you. All Venice was both model and painter, and life was so pictorial that art couldn't help becoming so." My guess is that James' (often hilarious, and often moving) description of the sentimental

tourist in Venice can open up opportunities for forging new connections between the Renaissance and nineteenth century aesthetics; at the very least, his sentimental tour guide is a very good historian.

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Davenant's New World Dances and the Political Aesthetics of Motion

This essay will treat William Davenant's proto-operas set in the New World, especially *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658), as theatrical specimens that pursue their political projects—justifying empire, championing the New Model Army, countering Habsburg networks of commerce—by means of a notably motional aesthetic. I will focus on two key features that play newly heightened roles in structuring dramatic action: scene changes and dance. By telling stories through a series of successively revealed perspectival set pieces, Davenant does ekphrasis in reverse, transforming historical narratives of conquest into a visual medium. And yet these wings, shutters, and maskings are by no means artifacts of a purely plastic art, since, unfurled to music, they virtually dance across the stage and depend upon ordered motion in order to tell their stories. Davenant's scripts also make elaborate use of national dance forms, manipulating Spanish, English, and "Incan" genres in order to explain the process of conquest choreographically. In particular, these dances mark race (in its several senses) through stylistic variations in bodily motion. This essay will pay special attention to the intersection of color and motion in scenery and dance: both the dancing Indians painted on scenery and the brownface worn by dancers portraying Indians perform ethnography through the joint manipulation of strange pigments and strange gestures. I will also address the role of printed arguments for proto-operas in explaining the motion of scenery and dance, and the resulting dialogic relationship between seeing and reading motion. For Davenant, motion becomes a key medium for telling colonial history not only because the Commonwealth regulated theatrical speech, but because his subject matter—voyage, large-scale battles, and the unfolding of historical time—lend themselves especially well to corporate organizations of bodily and scenic motion.

