

that he may be asking for a little too much self-reflection—that the severity of “performance as inquiry” may compromise some of the joy and creative energy that student Shakespeare can produce. One of the lessons of this excellent collection must be that there are many ways for Shakespearean performance to contribute to the learning of university students, and that such work is “uniquely positioned to play a formative role in the lives of those who build and experience it” (8).

The Future of Illusion

By Victoria Kahn, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014

Reviewer: Paul A. Kottman

Victoria Kahn’s *The Future of Illusion* has already received deserved praise from many reviewers in various venues. I want to echo much of that praise here, and also to raise a few questions.

Kahn is surely one of the most careful scholars of the early modern period today, and in this new book she moves with finesse between discussions of Shakespeare, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Spinoza and Vico, and later modern thinkers of “political theology” (Freud, Schmitt, Strauss, Arendt, Kantorowicz, Cassirer) for whom these earlier figures form an essential canon. Given this framing, *The Future of Illusion* has been rightly perceived as a timely riposte to trends in two broad quarters of inquiry.

On the one hand, Kahn responds to a resurgent interest in political theology (in the wake of 9/11, the Arab Spring, and ISIS) by reminding us of the centrality of the early modern canon for any genealogy of “political theology”—by which she means, “not the theological legitimation or theological essence of political authority, but rather . . . the *problem* of the relationship between politics and religion once this theological legitimation is no longer convincing.”

On the other hand, Kahn is concerned to correct a somewhat

ironic tendency, on the part of many early modern scholars, to take (too) seriously certain implications of the notion that we are now living in a “postsecular world, in which the Whiggish narrative of increasing secularization in the West has come up against the fact that religion has not withered away.” Against critics who affirm the permanence of a “theological imaginary” in politics—and who, somewhat tellingly, rely on Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss or Lacan to make their case—Kahn insists (with Hans Blumenberg, Erich Auerbach, and Hannah Arendt as her guides) that “a decisive break between modernity and theological modes of explanation” means that, so far as we can know, political authority cannot be explained by revealed religion, or the ahistorical power of the theological “symbolic.” When political authority and legitimacy become the *explanandum*, Kahn suggest, then the *explanans* can only be what human beings have believed, done and made—the self-transforming history of human values, works and practices. She thus links “the possibility of a purely secular politics” to “a purely secular conception of poiesis”—and she sees the latter as “central” to the work of Hobbes, Vico, Shakespeare and Spinoza, all of whom (she avers) suggest that human beings “can know only what we have made ourselves.” (I will return to Kahn’s discussion of *poiesis* in a moment.)

With respect to early modern studies, at least, Kahn has left those who advocate a “return” to the explanatory power of revealed religion with a lot of explaining to do. Odes to the enduring power of the “religious symbolic,” in analyses of early modern social history or of so-called “sacramental poetics,” might yield something of interest to historians of ideas or antiquarians; but the contribution made by such work to contemporary debates about modernity’s secular legitimacy is, Kahn thinks, limited and questionable. She thus calls upon critics of the early modern period to better explain their views with respect to the “neglected dialogue” between contemporary discussions (across the human sciences) about the legitimacy of modern values and institutions, and the early modern figures in whose writings the terms of this dialogue first took shape. After all, if there is one thing on which Schmitt, Benjamin, Strauss, Cassirer, Blumenberg, Arendt, Löwith, Freud, Auerbach, and the rest agree—their stark differences notwithstanding—it is that we are not ‘done’ with Renaissance or early modern writers and artists when it comes to thinking about what it means to be “modern,” or about what, if anything, distinguishes forms of life that have

emerged over the course of the past four or five centuries in the 'West' and elsewhere. In this sense, Kahn encourages critics of the early modern period to consider whether they have anything "more alive, more current, more relevant" (as she puts it) to contribute to debates about the "legitimacy of the modern age," beyond a return to the theological symbolic. Can those who study Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Vico or Spinoza for a living read them as 'live' figures and thinkers for discussion today, and not just as mouthpieces for what human beings once practiced or believed in a past era?

So far, so good. The provocations Kahn offers to early modern scholars will certainly find an appreciative audience, this reviewer included. (It should be noted that Kahn is hardly alone in this effort—as other recent contributions to the critical literature attest: for instance, *Political Theology and Early Modernity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], edited by Julia Reinhard Lupton and Graham Hammill; and Rocco Rubini's *The Other Renaissance* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014]). Anyway, who among us would want to resist the exhortation to take up present debates through more attentive reading to early modern texts and their interpreters?

In the space left to me, then, I want to take up Kahn's exhortation, in order to raise three questions about her approach in *The Future of Illusion*.

My first question concerns the static terms of "debate" and "side-taking," which Kahn uses to frame her discussion—as if the central issue were a quarrel over a kind of perennial question: Does political authority (or poetic activity) have a transcendent-theological source, or is it immanently 'human' through-and-through? The 'good' moderns, Kahn seems to suggest, are those who take the latter position—and who hit upon new ways of "defending" their stance. The "reactionary" moderns (Schmitt, Strauss) by contrast, did not get with the right program—a mistake that, Kahn more than hints, led one of them to take a disastrous political position in the twentieth century. In Kahn's telling, the 'good' modernisms of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Shakespeare, Spinoza, Blumenberg, Arendt, and Benjamin—"which seem more attuned to the capacity of human beings to create the values that bind them and give their lives meaning"—is juxtaposed to what she calls the "reactionary stance" of Schmitt and Strauss, who suffered from a kind of "ethical nostalgia" (to borrow Bernard Williams's felicitous phrase) for

the 'old gods,' for metaphysical or theological principles as the ground for political life. (Kahn does not mention this, but her perennial-debate-approach invites comparisons to analogous 'debates' in other historical eras. In classical Athens, for example, the struggle between 'old religious' and 'new secular-poetic' models of political legitimacy took shape in Greek tragedy. Was this debate 'modern,' too?)

Now, one need not defend Strauss or Schmitt (Kahn is more than generous to both), in order to ask: Must the 'legitimacy' of the modern age really rest on a defense of modern intellectual revolutions (of Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Spinoza) against other attempts (Strauss's reliance on classical reason; Schmitt's "Catholic paradigm of political representation") to answer the 'great question' of the source of political authority?

At the very least, two of Kahn's own heroes—Blumenberg and Arendt—did not think so. Blumenberg went so far as to say that "we are going to have to free ourselves from the idea that there is a firm canon of 'the great questions' that . . . have occupied human curiosity and motivated the pretension to world and self-interpretation" (65). Indeed, for Blumenberg, the prospect of freeing ourselves from the view that there are right or wrong answers to great questions is one of the modern age's promises—since we can now ask (Blumenberg thinks), why *certain* issues became pressing when they did? Likewise, for Arendt, the 'legitimacy' of secular politics does not rest on any correction of the 'wrong-headed' theological-symbolic model, but on actual, lived failures of recourse to extra-political sources of political authority (violence, God, truth). For Blumenberg and Arendt, put differently, there is no "*problem* of the relationship between politics and religion once theological legitimation is no longer convincing." Theological explanations for political authority are replaced by secular political philosophies because of prior catastrophes (Arendt), or because the modern age and the scientific revolution amounted to "the second overcoming of Gnosticism" (Blumenberg). Now, there are all manner of questions that one could raise—and that *have* been raised (by Bernard Williams, Karl Löwith, Robert Pippin, Richard Rorty and many others)—about the virtues and shortcomings of Blumenberg's 'legitimation' story, or Arendt's "revolutionary" politics. But, at the very least—when it comes to Kahn's book—it would have been helpful to consider the issue of modernity's "legitimacy" as something more than a rejection of the "theological symbolic." Indeed,

by making *that* rejection the basis of modernity's legitimacy, Kahn inadvertently keeps "theological symbolism" 'alive' as modernity's "other" (as the chief alternative to secular politics). That is, Kahn risks reifying an epistemological critique of 'the theological' as the sole basis for secularization's legitimacy. But there are many other possible stories to tell about 'how we got to be us' (Hegel's, Marx's, Nietzsche's, Foucault's) that are neither Schmitt's nor Strauss's, nor exactly Blumenberg's or Arendt's—and which do not rely on epistemological critiques of theology, but rather on different narratives of epochal change (whether 'Hegelian' or 'genealogical' or whatever).

Indeed—to get to my second question—there are many stories about modernity, many "secularization theses," that hardly fit within the frame Kahn uses (the 'two-sided' debate model just mentioned). For instance, it is true that Blumenberg (like Kahn) is keen to show how modern notions of "progress" are not merely 'secularized' notions of Christian eschatology. But Blumenberg's thesis arose directly from his confrontation with Löwith, who never meant to suggest that "the notion of progress is just Christian eschatology secularized." Löwith suggested only that it would be difficult to account for *why* "progress" became such an important notion to the modern natural sciences, for instance, unless Christian views about the redemptive character of history had at least something to do with that. And then there is Hegel, who was intensely interested in the 'problem of modernity,' and who has no truck with the kind of transcendent sources of political authority to which Schmitt refers, but who also spoke of "God," the "divine" and so forth (albeit in highly idiosyncratic ways). So, too, Hegel's "modernity" emerges in dialogue with the notion of modernity as "loss" (as in Hölderlin or Schiller)—and all of them, by the way, obsessively 'engaged with' Shakespeare and Spinoza and so forth. And if Hegel came to see "gain" and not just "loss" in modernity, it was also in large measure because of his encounter with the Scottish Enlightenment as filtered through his own Protestant education (see Laurence Dickey's helpful *Hegel: Religion, Economics and the Politics of Spirit: 1770–1807* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987]).

Throwing all this onto the table may seem unfair, since Kahn's book expressly avoids the eighteenth century—calling us, instead, to focus on that "neglected dialogue" between the late moderns and early moderns. But much gets muffled in the focus on that

neglected dialogue, I think, without a more nuanced appreciation of the whole 'secularization' problem in modern thought and social practice (economics, politics, imperialism, globalization). So, without at least *some* of this material on the table, the "neglected dialogue" that Kahn wants us to hear sounds—I am suggesting—too narrowly 'two sided.' Indeed, part of the woodenness of contemporary debates about 'political theology'—which Kahn rightly wants to criticize—is also attributable, at least in part, to an insufficient reckoning with the various 'secularization theses' that have circulated over the past several centuries.

Lastly, let me turn to Kahn's invocation of "poiesis"—or, to what she calls the "new anthropology" (which she attributes to Hobbes and Vico) according to which human beings can know only what we make: "the entirely human capacity to make least part of the world we live in." Here my questions are straightforward. Kahn seems to see this conception of *poiesis* as something these thinkers simply hit on, a kind of 'great idea' or 'insight' or 'discovery' with which she agrees, and which makes obsolete any reliance on older religious notions of poetic authority, political authority or historical progress. But this conclusion avoids the basic question of 'legitimacy' with which her whole book is concerned. After all, what gives this broad notion of *poiesis* itself its legitimacy? Does Kahn mean to appeal to some ahistorical standard according to which Hobbes and Vico are 'correct,' and if so, on what basis? Is there not a different narrative—more internal, more historical—that one could tell about this "insight" into what Vico called "poetic wisdom"? Indeed, were not Vico and Hobbes themselves both at pains to present precisely this kind of immanent narrative (about the origins of political institutions, in Hobbes; or, about the origins of religious thought, in Vico)—rather than a 'theory' of 'the way things are'?

And this matters, too, when one turns to *poiesis* (as Kahn does) to explain historical developments in the realm of politics. Kahn speaks—in her concluding summary—of the "capacity of human beings to create the values that bind them and give their lives meaning." But is an *ex nihilo* 'poetic' creation really a good *explanation* for our values and political commitments? Did we poetically 'create' secularized forms of life, feminism, human rights, the dignity of the individual, the capitalist market, the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and so forth? Is *that* the strongest, most "secular" account of the "legitimacy" of these world-historical develop-

ments that we can muster, after a careful reading of Shakespeare or Hobbes or Machiavelli or Spinoza? One hopes not.

*Ink, Stink Bait, Revenge, and Queen Elizabeth: A
Yorkshire Yeoman's Household Book*
Steven W. May and Arthur F. Marotti
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014

Reviewer: Robert Tittler

Several years ago the British Library received a large collection of papers of the Spencer and Stanhope extended family of Cannon Hall, Yorkshire, which they considered valuable chiefly for the correspondence of Lord Nelson's second in command at the Battle of Trafalgar. Upon arrival, a thorough examination of the full contents of the collection turned up a household book compiled by John Hanson of Rastrick, Yorkshire, a tenant of the Elizabethan-era family patriarch John Stanhope. Hanson (1517–99), a scrivener and apparently self-taught legal advisor, proved a man of broad interests. The diverse contents of his book speak to many of them. Hanson recorded a lengthy prose narrative plus a later ballad concerning a bitter fourteenth-century inter-family feud (Chapter 1); two long-lost broadside ballads describing Queen Elizabeth's post-Armada celebratory procession through London (Chapter 2); several texts copied from printed sources (Chapter 3); and other, unpublished, texts including two poems attributed to Elizabeth herself (Chapter 4). These are all bound together with lists of English monarchs, manorial tenants, and English counties, and instructions and recipes on such diverse subjects as making inks and pigments and catching fish and fowl.

This intriguing and hitherto unknown source inspired Steven W. May and Arthur F. Marotti to undertake their summary and analysis of Hanson's work, to transcribe much of its contents, and more generally to emphasize the importance of an early modern scribal