

Making Make-Believe Real: Politics as Theater in Shakespeare's Time. By Garry Wills. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. vii, 388. \$30.)

In his latest work, prolific Pulitzer-prize winning historian Garry Wills returns to a favored period and, ostensibly, to its shining light, William Shakespeare. Yet, inverting conventional historical designations, Wills here portrays Queen Elizabeth as the leading actor in an inherently theatrical age, her debated legitimacy reified as a dramatic construct. If the Protestant Elizabeth's position as an unmarried female monarch was beyond the sixteenth-century political imagination, as Wills asserts, "then she would just have to be imagined into office, and imaginatively retained there too" (7). Traveling from the court, through the suburbs, and out into the English provinces, Wills charts Elizabeth's cultivation of a new Camelot, a Faerie Kingdom presided over by a Virgin Queen and promoted by an extraordinary PR team of politicians, patrons, poets, and playwrights unified by a simple truth: "Too much was at stake for [Elizabeth] to fail."

Portraying the Elizabethan project as something like "an experimental theater troupe" (5), Wills brings a touch of the theatrical *avant garde* to the study's organization. In five chapters - or acts -- he explores the key imaginative constructs of love, monarchy, religion, nationhood, and warfare that defined and sustained her reign. He titles each chapter as a semantic equation -- "Make-Believe (Courtly) Love; Make-Believe (Faerie) Nation" -- that captures the process whereby abstract concepts are reimagined as political realities. The parentheses also figuratively encapsulate the study's generic embrace of public plays and royal progresses, epic poetry and sonnet sequences, religious tracts and historical treatises, all of which

shaped, more or less publicly, the persona of the Virgin Queen. In a surprise move, Wills closes the book with vignettes of five major figures -- Leicester, Sidney, Essex, Raleigh, and Prince Henry -- who lived, and died, pursuing the Renaissance ideal. These elegiac epilogues remind us of the price some paid to play, and complicate the book's general celebration of Elizabeth's political acuity and durability.

Where the author's remarkable erudition casts new light on remote aesthetic forms with clear ideological affiliations, such as the tournament or the masque, his characterization of the playhouses as orthodox organs of the state is more problematic. In a running subplot that reveals Wills' determination to wrest the period from the presentist tendencies of prevailing critical theory, especially the New Historicism and its obsession with subversion, he spends a good deal of time telling the reader what Shakespeare actually meant - a move guaranteed to infuriate poststructuralists and amuse theater practitioners.

Yet, for all his polemicism, Wills draws a strikingly generous portrait of a "hypertrophically confident" (104) and profoundly formative period. Where literary scholars tend to map their postcolonial *ennui* onto the early modern landscape, Wills perceives an unflattering reflection of a present that favors cynicism, schism, and self-doubt over political and cultural collaboration. This book will appeal to readers of history, theater, and politics who also worry that America has lost its own ability to dream.