EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Kim Gilchrist, *Staging Britain's Past: Pre-Roman Britain in Early Modern Drama* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Xii+278pp. 978 1 3501 6334 8 (hardcover). 978 1 3501 6335 5 (ebook).

Christopher Ivic
Bath Spa University
c.ivic@bathspa.ac.uk

This book explores a past that, on one hand, is real and, on the other, imagined: real given its primary focus — early modern literary and political culture; imagined since accounts of pre-Roman and pre-Christian Britain that emerged in twelfth-century England and maintained a cultural presence well into the seventeenth century were fiction. An imagined past, however fictitious, has its uses, as this book admirably attests.

At the heart of the book is the issue of what it meant for early modern subjects, as individuals, as a civic community, as a national community, to 'know' history and to witness the theatre's enactment of the past. The simple and straightforward answer is that over time a furthering of knowledge of the past necessarily erodes any belief that Brutus (or Brute) sailed up the Dart, landed at Totnes and, as the story goes, founded a line of pre-Roman British monarchs. The account traced here — throughout the book, but especially in chapter 1 — is much more complicated, nuanced and sophisticated, in part because Gilchrist focuses on more than Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*c.* 1135). Instead, the medieval and the early modern period's plural, polyvocal 'Brutan histories' emerge as the centrepiece — the term 'Brutan histories' is preferred to 'Galfridian' and/or 'The British History' because it better captures the heterogeneous textual (manuscript, print) as well as oral (ballads, narrative poetry) histories of the *Brut* tradition's representations of pre-Christian and pre-Roman Britain. Although the book unfolds in a chronological manner, it resists a teleological narrative precisely because it attends to the ebb and flow of Brutan histories, what the author terms 'historiographic shifts' (p. 9). As Gilchrist suggests, 'those with dwindling belief in Brute towards the end of the Elizabethan era may have had their faith reinvigorated

by the outpouring of Brutan imagery and panegyric that accompanied James VI of Scotland's accession to the English throne' (p. 28). They 'may have', but gauging belief or faith is no easy task. Gilchrist draws attention to one such believer: namely, Richard Harvey, brother of Gabriel, whose *Philadelphus* (1593) offered a defence of the Brutan histories. He also cites Thomas Deloney's *Garland of Good Will* (*c.* 1593), which includes a ballad on Estrild, mistress of Brutus's firstborn son Locrine, as an instance of the circulation and popularity of things Brutan. Returning to James's English accession, some of James's panegyrists voice doubt even as they invoke Brutus. Consider, for example, Drayton's *To the maiestie of King James* (1603), which includes the line 'Since *Brute* first raign'd (if men of *Brute* alow)'. Such scepticism is echoed by Chettle who writes in his *Englands Mourning Garment* (1603) 'Beginne with Brute, (if that of Brute be true)'. Gilchrist is less interested in whether Deloney or, say, Spenser believed in Brutus. His focus, rather, is on the enabling and shaping fantasies underpinning the adaptation and appropriation of pre-Roman histories of Britain for public performance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577; 1587) is just one of a handful of sixteenth-century chronicles that disseminated Brutan histories. Knowledge of the past was not, of course, restricted to print culture; London's theatrical culture was a prime site for the staging of not to mention interrogation of Brutan histories to a 'wider, non-literate, popular culture' (p. 36). The author covers an impressive range of early modern dramatic texts, which he prefers to term 'performed history' (p. 19) in favour of the more familiar but Foliocentric 'history plays'. These texts include Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1565), which marks the inauguration of Brutan drama as a means by which to use the pre-Roman British past to speak truth to power, *Locrine* (1595), *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605), Munday's *The Triumphes of Re-vnited Britania* (1605), Shakespeare's *The True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters* (1608) and *Cymbeline* (*c.* 1610) as well as some less obvious texts, including other civic performances (Lord Mayor's shows, royal entries), two lost plays, academic and court performances and, finally, Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1637). What Gilchrist supplies, therefore, is a comprehensive account of 'Brutan drama' from roughly 1486 to the reign of King Charles I. (On pp. 23-6 the reader will find a handy table of 'Brutan drama in performance and print, 1486-1634.)

Although Gilchrist resists a teleological narrative, a somewhat fixed chronology is in place, for the author shifts from the staging of Brutan origins in *Locrine* as well as two lost plays ('The Conqueste of Brute' and 'King Lud') in chapter 2 to *Leir, No-body and Some-body* and *King Lear* in chapter 3, three plays dating from 1605-08, 'when questions of nationhood and "Britishness" were triggered by James VI and I's recent

accession to the English throne' (p. 133). In many ways, the Elizabethan texts anticipate the presence of 'etiological erosion' that resonates throughout the Jacobean plays. *Locrine*, for instance, stages 'a singularly bleak enactment of British origins' (p. 100). *Leir*, first performed at the Rose in 1594, was first published in 1605, and given the political climate (Anglo-Scottish union debate) it is not hard to figure out why this text — 'a play about a king's division of Britain and the kingdom's subsequent happy reunion' (p. 144) — was published in the early years of King James VI and I's reign. Texts that could easily be read as propaganda or supportive of union are handled in a much more nuanced manner. Munday's *Triumphs of Re-vnited Britania* is a case in point, for Gilchrist divides his analysis between the performance's 'triumphant and unequivocal' endorsement of 'Brutan historicity' and the printed text's 'wavering' and 'equivocal' account (pp. 141, 142). *Leir, No-body and Some-body* and *King Lear* belonged to a 'micro-genre of Jacobean printed drama': the Brutan 'true chronicle history' play (p. 142). Gilchrist's coverage of these three plays attends to the re-emergence of Brutan tropes in the early years of King James's reign, tropes that were put to a variety of cultural, ideological and political uses. Particularly noteworthy is Gilchrist's reading of *King Lear*'s (Q1) '*Historica passio*', which serves as a fine example of the author's close, careful detail to the materiality of early modern texts. Resisting modern editors' emendation — '*Hysterica passio*' — Gilchrist treats Q1's '*Historica*' as resonant of the play's historicity and topicality as well as its 'terminal division between Brutan and lived history' (p. 162).

The diminution of Brutan histories — what Gilchrist terms 'etiological erosion'— in the late Elizabethan (if not earlier — Polydore Vergil comes to mind) and, especially, the early Jacobean period is registered forcefully in such historiographical works as Camden's *Britannia* (1586; trans. 1610), Daniel's *The First Part of the Historie of England* (1612) and Speed's *Historie of Great Britaine under the conquests of ye Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans* (1611). 'I am not ignorant', Camden famously declared in his *Britain* (1610), 'that the first originalls of nations are obscure by reason of their profound antiquite', adding 'the most ancient and the very first Inhabitants of this Ile' and 'whence this word *Britaine* had the originall derivation […] [n]either can we hope to atteine unto any certaintie heerein'. Chapter 4 turns to texts that appropriate Brutan myth even though its claim to historicity had been thoroughly questioned if not rejected. A recurring focus in this book is the anxiety prompted by the diminution of Brutan time: that is, a fear of or resistance to the historiographical lacuna that the dismissal of Brutan histories brought about. The analysis of *Cymbeline* (F1) attends to this anxiety. For example, Imogen's dream (4.2) about not having reached — or never being able to reach — Milford Haven is read as a liminal moment in terms of both space and time, a 'temporal bubble' (p. 202). 'But perhaps' adds Gilchrist, 'this space is

simply the gap in time, once filled by Geoffrey of Monmouth, that has become a blank once more' (p. 202). In this sense, Imogen — whose name connects her to Innogen, Brutus's wife — is 'emblematic of something airy and imagined, something like the Brutan histories' (p. 202). Perhaps more than any other chapter, the final one demonstrates the author's point that 'the Brutan histories carried a powerful affective resonance for English readers and playgoers' (222). But what is sacrificed here is the earlier chapters' attention to the cultural moment, indeed the political culture, of the play-text. In his *Archipelagic English*, John Kerrigan argues convincingly that post-1603 plays about ancient Britain could not be read in an English-only perspective.[1] Given this chapter's trajectory — concluding with Townsend's *Albions Trivmph* (1632) and Milton's *A Masque* (1637) — it would have been productive to consider these Jacobean and Caroline texts within the wider (soon-to-be-warring) three-kingdom, four-nation context in which they were produced. Even the brief but informative coverage of a performance of *Gorboduc* at Dublin Castle in 1601, which Gilchrist terms 'an English colonial context' (p. 78), invites a reading more alert to the British and Irish geopolitical framework within which Brutan histories circulated and to which Brutan histories spoke.

This invaluable book will no doubt prove to be a prime resource for scholars interested in the staging of pre-Roman Britain in the early modern period. It breaks new ground, it supplies smart readings as well as re-readings of canonical and non-canonical plays, and, crucially, it rewrites and redirects our current understandings of matters Brutish.

[1] John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English*: *Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).