

Albert D. Pionke. *The Ritual Culture of Victorian Professionals: Competing for Ceremonial Status, 1838-1877*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-4094-7046-5. Price: US\$104.95/£60.00.

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This informative and engaging book notes the centrality of ritual in nineteenth-century English culture and the coeval rise of professionalism and provocatively seeks to trace their interconnections. It argues that Victorian professionals used the ritual practices historically associated with traditional elites as a means of achieving and exercising a social status that depended on the public display of authority. Meanwhile Victorian writers, novelists in particular, appropriated this authority by exhibiting in their fictions an insider knowledge of these collective rituals, often representing them through rhetorical strategies such as parody, which transformed the display of knowledge into its own form of authorizing ritual. This twist of plot, what Albert D. Pionke terms “parodic resignification” (22), is one of the book’s many strengths and invites a consideration of irony as an assertion of cultural authority. That novelists were poised to effect this transfer of cultural capital derives from their associations with the professional classes: Charles Dickens got his start as a legal clerk and then a shorthand court reporter (law); William Makepeace Thackeray attended Cambridge (university), was called to the bar (law), and ran for the House of Commons (politics); Anthony Trollope was descended

from two Anglican clergymen (church) and a barrister (law), ran for Parliament (politics), and famously worked for the Post Office (civil service).

Pionke clearly and usefully defines ritual as “any scripted, repeatable, highly formalized and self-conscious collective activity that strives for a level of meaningfulness not found in quotidian life” (6). Ritual requires an audience of laymen, an appeal to precedent, specific dress and antiquated forms of address, and includes oaths and processions. Here Pionke anticipates an audience of well-read Victorianists, whether professional or amateur, who are well-versed in the customs that organized nineteenth-century social life, from finger bowls to calling cards to widow’s weeds. Thus he makes a point of distinguishing quotidian customs such as the giving of flowers from the parliamentary oaths that barred Jewish and Catholic Englishmen from serving as Members of Parliament. And he is equally attuned to the nuances of Victorian socio-economic distinctions—making clear, for example, that the collective ritual culture of barristers was more robust than that of solicitors, which is consistent with their occupying different rungs of the social hierarchy even though they both belonged to the professional classes. The same distinctions within professional culture would presumably apply to medicine, divided as it was between physicians and surgeons, although the medical professions remain mostly outside the purview of this study.

The book is organized into three sections: the first two chapters consider education and oaths, the second two chapters explore legal and political rituals, and the last chapter identifies the consequences of failed rituals. Chapter 1 focuses on the collective rituals that punctuate university life at Oxford and Cambridge (costumes, matriculation, sport and debating clubs, sermons, examinations, processions, jargon, the

awarding of degrees) and views them as contributing to pre-professional culture by initiating future politicians and writers into the power structures of the ruling classes. The chapter begins with fascinating historical material about the colleges and concludes with perceptive readings of three university novels, an underserved genre: Cuthbert Bede's *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green* (1853-7), Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), and William Makepeace Thackeray's *History of Pendennis* (1848-50). Chapter 2 ingeniously centers on oath taking, reading it through Georg Simmel's work on secret societies and Emile Durkheim's idea of the sacred; these "creation rituals" (21) borrowed from ecclesiastical bodies in order to distinguish physicians, barristers and politicians from social groups barred by Parliament from taking oaths, thus illustrating the process of secularization whereby non-religious institutions acquired religious functions. Chapter 3 considers barristers and the rituals that facilitated their social ascension to positions of power within the Queen's government; because solicitors and attorneys did not typically attend Oxford or Cambridge, but received legal training according to the apprenticeship model characteristic of artisans, they are omitted. Using Max Weber's idea of charisma, this chapter culminates in an insightful reading of the legal plots featured in Anthony Trollope's *Orley Farm* (1861-2) and *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871-2) in which the competition for social status between lawyers and writers emerges. Chapter 4 concentrates on the parodic representation of electioneering in Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), Samuel Warren's *Ten Thousand a-Year* (1841), George Eliot's *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1872) and Trollope's *Ralph the Heir* (1871). Using both Durkheim's understanding of the sacred and Weber's idea of charisma, this chapter sees novelists as "siphoning away" (21) the authority of those

professionals positioned to seek public office. Chapter 5 contains hilarious material about the Eglinton Tournament, a fiasco intended as a corrective to the lack of ritualistic grandeur and glamour that characterized Queen Victoria's downscale coronation in 1838. Designed to assert the authority of the Scottish Tory aristocracy through a staging of medieval rituals, the tournament was ridiculed by writers and a public increasingly impatient with ceremonial forms.

While Pionke defines Victorian professionalism in terms of demonstrated expertise in "discrete fields of knowledge," training and certification, self-governing associations and an ethic of service that rejects personal profit and commercial gain (7-8), he seems to depart from that grounding in order to include as professionals several social elites who do not seem to belong and to exclude others who might. Members of Parliament, for example, on whom the book spends a fair amount of time and about whom it makes many interesting and compelling points, do not seem to be members of the professional classes as I understand them. While an MP would presumably, or at least ideally, embrace the ethic of care pivotal to Victorian professionalism, he would not necessarily have demonstrated expertise in a discrete field nor have undergone specialized training or certification. More often than not, he would have hailed from the landed classes. In fact, he would have needed to come from those classes before the passage in 1858 of the act abolishing of property qualification for MPs. Pionke concedes this slippage between the ruling classes and the professional classes at the beginning of Chapter 4, but justifies including MPs by virtue of the House of Commons representing a "parallel arena" for the performance of ceremonial status (123). To me this logic reveals

where the book's heart really is, which is in the uses of ritual throughout Victorian culture, not confined to professionalism.

The need to return to professionalism distracts attention from the book's rich and provocative analyses of ritual and its role in the transfer of cultural capital in a putatively secular modern world. It requires excluding attorneys and solicitors. It requires including civil service even though I am fairly certain that Trollope considered himself a professional writer, but not a professional civil servant. It requires accommodating the fact that doctors and lawyers took oaths well before the rise of nineteenth-century professionalism. It requires some explanation about how the demise of the rituals promoting the assize court after the emergence of railroad travel in the 1840s relates to a professional culture that does not fully emerge until the 1880s. And while I absolutely agree that nineteenth-century writers sought social status by affiliating themselves with professional values, I see those values as matters of asserting knowledge, not asserting knowledge specifically about ruling-class ritual. To my mind, one of the most exciting possible applications of Pionke's argument (although it would extend beyond the book's focus on England) would be an analysis of M. Homais, the provincial pharmacist in Gustave Flaubert's 1856 *Madame Bovary*, who identifies himself as a professional journalist when he ironizes the rituals of the countryside's agricultural fair.

This scholarly and thoughtful book becomes something of a polemic in the epilogue where Pionke deplores the decline of university ritual, and associates it with the eclipse of the university's public authority both in Great Britain and in the United States. This agenda emerges a little bit in the introduction, but more explicitly in the book's end, sounding an elegiac note for the dying of the university's cultural authority, or at least for

the cultural authority of those who used to be its central representatives, the faculty. Admonishing professors for abandoning their ceremonial roles in the misguided belief that expertise is enough, Pionke seems to join conservatives like David Brooks, public intellectuals like Leon Botstein, and provocateurs like William Deresiewicz who lament the university's long severing of its real and spiritual affiliations with religious institutions and their ethical missions.

It is this religious yearning that again makes me wish Pionke had concentrated more exclusively on the fraught role of ritual in Victorian culture, for it is the material on ritual that he gathers with such an expert eye and such illuminating intuitions, and it is this material that makes the book indispensable for any nineteenth-century scholar. From what Pionke has assembled in this impressive study, Victorian restlessness around ritual—its centrality to the Catholic desires of the Oxford Movement (which regrettably he mentions only in passing) as well as to the social aspirations of ironic novelists (which he discusses masterfully)—is pivotal to any nuanced understanding of the Victorians whether professional or just human.

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