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## **Review of Chovanec, K. (2020) Pan-Protestant heroism in early modern Europe**

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### **Citation**

Rolfe, K. (2022). Review of Chovanec, K. (2020) Pan-Protestant heroism in early modern Europe, 52(1). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3502401>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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# *The* **Spenser Review**

## **Kevin Chovanec, Pan-Protestant Heroism in Early Modern Europe**

by Kirsty Rolfe

**Kevin Chovanec, *Pan-Protestant Heroism in Early Modern Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. i-vii + 283pp. ISBN: 9783030407049. £69.99 hardback.**

Kevin Chovanec's *Pan-Protestant Heroism in Early Modern Europe* takes on a key – and topical – issue in current scholarship in early modern history and literary studies: the formation and development of transnational cultural and religious connections and identities. Chovanec's work is a worthy contribution to a growing body of research that challenges and complicates ideas of 'national identity' in the early modern period, through considering the transnational movements of both people and cultural products. His focus is literary, looking at how texts and tropes (and those who produced, circulated, and consumed them) crossed national and linguistic borders, and how ideas of religious identity and community were formed through shared tropes and typologies.

The particular lens through which Chovanec examines this topic is, by his own admission, an unfashionable one: heroism, now 'somewhat of a taboo in the academy, beset by the recognition that past heroisms smuggle in racist, misogynistic, and authoritarian assumptions' (13). While the racial and gendered implications of the 'heroism' he examines are rather beyond the scope of the study, Chovanec's transnational focus does provide a powerful corrective to nationalist narratives: early modern Protestant heroes, he

argues, were produced within transnational cultural networks, and the fields they fought upon were those of the transnational Protestant imaginary. *Pan-Protestant Heroism* offers a series of interlinked case studies of Protestant heroes: Chapter 2 tackles the heroes of the Dutch Revolt (with especial focus on William of Orange and Maurice of Nassau); Chapter 3 the hopes surrounding the ill-fated Henry, Prince of Wales; Chapter 4 the similar hopes surrounding the marriage of Elizabeth Stuart to Frederick V, Elector Palatine, and Frederick's later, ill-fated election to the Bohemian crown (ill-fatedness is something of a theme when it comes to the 'Protestant Cause' in seventeenth-century Europe); and Chapter 5 the victories, and death, of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus in the Thirty Years' War. He concludes – in a short but convincing coda – by reading Oliver Cromwell through this lens. Chovanec reads the representations of all of these 'heroes' as connected, even repetitive: linked together by shared metaphors, apocalyptic hopes, and Biblical typology. Throughout, Chovanec is careful to keep his focus not on 'the hero him- or herself' but on 'the hero as a sign, a figure, with a meaning that can be contested and manipulated' (34).

Chovanec's introductory chapter makes a persuasive case for his approach, situating it among existing scholarship on early modern literature and (trans)nationalism. Throughout the chapter – and, indeed, the book – Chovanec doesn't argue against reading for constructions of national identities, but rather suggests that these should be considered within the context of supranational religious ones that 'were constructed alongside and within national discourses' (5). His reading of transnational identities and connections feeds back into his reading of national ones: '[p]art of Englishness in the seventeenth century, as we shall see, was explained by the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus; part of Elizabethan Chivalry must be traced to William of Orange and the Dutch Revolt' (6). As this quotation suggests, Chovanec's focus remains primarily on English texts and contexts (with some exceptions), but he orientates his reading of these towards the continent, in particular towards the Dutch Republic, considering English, Dutch, German, and neo-Latin literature. This multilingual approach is welcome, and aligns Chovanec's work with recent studies by Coldiron (2015), Dunthorne (2013), Helmers (2015), Oldenburg (2015) and Rubright (2014), as well as current work on Anglo-Dutch connections by the 'North Sea Crossings' project (Levelt and Putter, 2022) and the pioneering work of Murdoch (2000, 2001, 2006) which gets relatively little mention. Chovanec both draws on, and at times comes into productive tension with, the 'New British History' of Kerrigan (2008), Morrill (2006), Pocock (1975, 1999) and others, and with work on English

nationalism and literature by (among others) Hadfield (2004), Helgerson (1992), and Schywzer (2004). The most innovative section of the opening chapter is Chovanec's exploration of several prevalent ecclesiological metaphors for the Protestant Church. In constructing ideas of transnational Protestant community, early modern writers, he argues, returned repeatedly to ideas of the Church as bride and/or mother; threatened or sickening body; typological restatement of Israel, and besieged, persecuted 'remnant'. These metaphors recur throughout the book, with a particular focus on Biblical typology and apocalypticism: here, the omission of reference to Killeen's 2016 monograph *The Political Bible* is puzzling.

The second chapter concentrates on the earliest of the 'heroes' under discussion: the military leaders of the Dutch Revolt, arguing that depictions of the Revolt mark 'the emergence of a pan-Protestant heroic tradition' (48). This tradition does not mark a break with the past – quite the opposite: the 'heroes' of the Revolt were placed within the long perspectives of providential tradition, the war they fought in understood as part of the age-old struggle against the Antichrist. Chovanec examines the transnational context and meanings of Geoffrey Whitney's *Choice of Emblemes* (1586) and Jan Janszoon Orlers' *Triumphs of Nassau* (1613), arguing that both reflect (in both literal and figurative terms) 'a transnational space of debate and literary collaboration' (51). Chovanec chooses not to tackle – at least not in detail – some of the most obviously 'transnational' publications: while pamphlets dealing with news of the Revolt do occupy a section of the chapter, there is little quotation from them or reference to the extensive literature on the topic. However, he is on firmer ground with literary criticism, and the most detailed and convincing study in the chapter is of Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, which argues that Artegall's narrative 'shifts between national and transnational frames, drawing on the pan-Protestant heroics of the Dutch Revolt and transnational reading habits common to those following foreign wars' (79-80). There is a particular focus on the clear Anglo-Dutch allegory of Arthur's succor of Belge, but Chovanec ranges further to a fascinating reading of how justice functions in the story. Chovanec's reading of Spenser is especially deft in bringing together the historic and the apocalyptic, seeing them as 'the same event, only at different representational levels – the abstract in prophecy, the particular on the ground in the Low Countries' (85). Throughout, Chovanec argues for a nuanced approach to Spenser's nationalism, arguing that his 'use of Dutch history [...] becomes a subtle negotiation of England's character, not as a nation, as so much past criticism has claimed, but rather as part of the church' (80). As Protestant heroism is 'eminently transnational, and forged on non-

English soil' it is, in essence, unavoidable: 'Spenser's allegory of English involvement always contains remnants and memories of the Dutch leaders' (83).

Chapter 3 takes as its focus a single figure – Henry Stuart – and examines how he brings together the vexed issue of 'Britishness' and wider transnational Protestantism. Chovanec starts with celebrations of the prince's birth, reading them as expressions of hope both for future 'British' national unity and for imperial expansion. He moves onto a reading of Henry as an imperial figure in Ben Jonson's masques *Oberon* (1610) and *The Barriers* (1611), and then onto the elegiac literature mourning the prince's untimely death in 1612. This chapter is especially smart in navigating the complexities and conflicts inherent in the prince's literary identities, and different writers' attitudes to them: Henry is Scottish, English, 'British'; an embodiment of national hopes for imperial expansion and of transnational Protestant solidarity; a statement of Stuart prestige and hope, and a challenge to his father's court and irenic ambitions. There is a particularly interesting discussion of Henry as a 'charismatic' leader, who functioned as 'a site for conceptualizing the wider Protestant community and optimistically imagining its future glory' (131). Chovanec is fascinating on the consequences of this 'charisma' within transnationalist ecclesiology, finding in George Wither's elegy for the prince criticism of the potentially idolatrous exaltation of a single heroic individual.

The fourth chapter turns to the marriage of Henry's sister Elizabeth to Frederick V, Elector Palatine, exploring the vexed framing of Frederick as the successor to the hopes centred on Henry. From a reading of the dynastically-focused celebrations of the match in London, Chovanec turns again to the wider European context, exploring celebratory events and publications in both England and Germany, and thinking about how both used transnational tropes and recognised transnational audiences. The chapter suffers slightly from the timing of the book's publication – too early to engage with Akkerman's reading of the marriage in her recent biography of Elizabeth (2021) – and (more problematically) it makes little reference to Smart and Wade's 2013 edited collection on the match, which is referred to as a 'monograph' and given relatively short shrift. However, Chovanec again proves himself a deft close reader: in particular, his sustained analysis of John Donne's epithalamion traces how Donne 'unravel[s] the figurative meanings of the marriage' (191) through attention to the various potential

interpretations of the nuptial spectacle. The chapter concludes by gesturing towards the reinvigoration of prophetic hopes for the Palatine couple at start of the Thirty Years' War.

The following chapter engages with the war more fully, by focusing on the figure of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus: both on descriptions of his German campaigns of the early 1630s, and in particular on the elegiacal literature mourning his death in 1632. Much of this literature, Chovanec argues, interprets Gustavus as a Protestant hero – using many of the same typological tropes as were used for the heroes described in earlier chapters – protecting 'liberty' in both Germany and elsewhere. Again, while Chovanec does gesture toward the transnational culture of news publication and transmission during the war, there is little substantial on this topic, and therefore his interpretation of how writers such as Thomas Carew and John Russell treat news prose would benefit from further grounding. However, once again his reading of poetry is persuasive, and this chapter offers an original and convincing interpretation of how poetic form and content can be read politically through the lens of early modern transnationalism.

Chovanec opens the chapter with a discussion of Carew's poem on Gustavus's death, 'In Answer to an Elegiacall Letter', arguing that 'Carew was attempting to consolidate an English national canon and poetics against the wider lens of the transnationalists' (211). Carew's poem, in Chovanec's reading, draws upon Donne and Jonson in order to claim an 'English' poetic tradition focused on the pleasures of peace, in which the 'dancing paces' of vernacular verse are seen as unsuitable for mourning and lionising those dead in 'foreign' religious wars (213). In contrast, more 'transnational' writers interpreted Gustavus's victories and death as part of a religious conflict in which English Protestants were as involved as German (and Swedish) ones, and drew upon typological and providential readings of the king that were common (if not identical) across European borders. Chovanec makes a tantalising connection here to writing practices, situating accounts of Gustavus within 'the kind of borrowing and overlap characteristic of a culture deeply indebted to imitation and "commonplacing"' (220); there are fascinating avenues for further research here. A major focus in this chapter is Gustavus's defence (in accounts of him, at least) of 'the German liberty', which Chovanec reads as a shifting, contingent concept, infinitely adaptable to political context, and connected to wider transnational discourses of republicanism.

Much of the chapter focuses on the central book of Ralph Knevet's *Supplement of the Faery Queene* (1635), arguing that Knevet's allegorisation of Gustavus as the knight Callimachus moves Spenser's setting to a pan-Protestant frame, where Faeryland becomes the transnational Church rather than the English nation. While Knevet was not an especially 'hot Protestant', his reworking of Spenser draws on the tropes of Protestant transnationalism, most notably the monsterring of Catholicism (in the poem, 'Catholics are giants and dragons, murderers and rapists') and a focus on history both within and without the narrative 'as a repeating, providential pattern [...] that ensures new heroes will arise in each generation to replace the last' (228; 225-6). Chovanec reads both Knevet's work and (later in the chapter) John Russell's epic poem *The Two Famous Pitcht Battels of Lypsich and Lutzen* (1634) as challenges to Carew's 'masquing aesthetic' (229), reasserting ideas of martial virtue and transnational Protestant providential history.

Chovanec's reading of Russell and Knevet against Carew testifies to one of the major strengths of this book: the attention paid to multiplicity and fluidity of interpretation. This is also present in the short concluding chapter, which examines Oliver Cromwell in terms of discourses of nationalism and prophetic transnationalism, tracing the multivocal nuances in his representation as Protestant 'hero'. Chovanec's reading here is convincing, and gestures towards fruitful areas for future study. Protestant writers across Europe may have 'shared a transnational cultural imaginary' (12), but they interacted with it in different ways, adapting the tropes and types they used to their specific contexts and affiliations. Those looking for sustained discussion of transnational textual practices – the practicalities of cross-border book production and circulation, of the mobile lives of writers and publishers – may come away from this book somewhat frustrated: while there is some discussion of these issues in relation (in particular) to Whitney and Orlers, this is, overall, a book more interested in the movements of ideas and metaphors than of people and physical works. *Pan-Protestant Heroism* is at its strongest when dealing with the poems at the heart of Chovanec's analysis: his nuanced readings of Spenser and Knevet are especially detailed and convincing. Overall, this is a thoroughly persuasive and elegant study, giving a compelling account of how typology and providential metaphors united imagined Protestant communities across both time and space, each functioning in various ways (as Chovanec writes of Prince Henry) as 'a foundation, a definition, and an adhesive' (136).

Kirsty Rolfe

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### 52.1.11

**Cite as:**

Kirsty Rolfe, "Kevin Chovanec, Pan-Protestant Heroism in Early Modern Europe," *Spenser Review* 52.1.11 (Winter 2022).

<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/52.1.11> (<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/52.1.11>)

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