



"A Mirror for Magistrates" and the Politics of the English Reformation (Massachusetts Studies in Early Modern Culture)

Scott Lucas

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Perhaps no other work of secular poetry was as widely read in Tudor England as the historical verse tragedy collection *A Mirror for Magistrates*. For over sixty years (1559–1621), this compendium of tragic monologues presented in the voices of fallen political figures from England's past remained almost constantly in print, offering both exemplary warnings to English rulers and inspiring models for literary authors, including Spenser and Shakespeare.

In a striking departure from previous scholarship, Scott Lucas shows that modern critics have misconstrued the purpose of the tragic verse narratives of the *Mirror*, approaching them primarily as uncontroversial meditations on abstract political and philosophical doctrines. Lucas revises this view, revealing many of the *Mirror* tragedies to be works topically applicable in form and politically contentious in nature.

Lucas returns the earliest poems of *A Mirror for Magistrates* to the troubled context of their production, the tumultuous reign of the Catholic Queen Mary (1553–1558). As Protestants suffering from the traumatic collapse of King Edward VI's "godly" rule (1547–1553) and from the current policies of Mary's government, the *Mirror* authors radically reshaped their poems' historical sources in order to craft emotionally moving narratives designed to provide models for interpreting the political failures of Edward VI's reign and to offer urgent warnings to Marian magistrates.

Lucas's study also reveals how, in later poems, the *Mirror* authors issued oblique appeals to Queen Elizabeth's officers, boldly demanding that they allow the realm of "the literary" to stand as an unfettered discursive arena of public controversy. Lucas thus provides a provocative new approach to this seminal but long-misunderstood collection, one that restores the *Mirror* to its rightful place as one of the greatest works of sixteenth-century English political literature.

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