

Thomas Betteridge. *Shakespearean Fantasy and Politics*.

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The keyword *fantasy* in Betteridge's title is derived from Žižek and names the subject's necessary investment in a symbolic order that prescribes the coordinates for perception and desire. *Politics*, for Betteridge, names the process, mediated by fantasy, by which individuals and groups ascribe meaning to events. *Shakespearean Fantasy and Politics* is interested, therefore, both in the ways that characters in Shakespeare's plays are shown to deal with the provisional, mediated nature of their own apprehensions, and also in the way that these same plays, by challenging and interrogating the interpretive desires of Shakespeare's audiences, construct theater as a space in which the operation of fantasy might productively be explored.

After an introduction in which Betteridge distinguishes his method from historicism, the book argues, via a series of generically organized chapters, that Shakespeare's attitudes toward theater and fantasy changed over the course of his long and prolific career. In a chapter on histories, the first tetralogy is taken to represent an early period of optimism about the ability of theater to generate moral truths. This early optimism gives way, the argument goes, by the time Shakespeare writes *Richard II*. Betteridge's second chapter, on late Elizabethan comedies, explores Shakespeare's growing skepticism by focusing on the way that characters (and audience members) construct meaning by projection. Chapter 3 looks at the politics of theater in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, while chapter 4 treats *Othello* as a kind of radically pessimistic piece in which Shakespeare (who plays Iago to the audience's gullible Othello) expresses despair at the ability of theater to do more than reinforce fantasy. Betteridge's Shakespeare finds a solution to this by accepting (as we must all do) that the gap between fantasy and the real does not preclude meaningful utterance, and this acceptance manifests itself in his turn to overtly self-referential storytelling in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. Thus is Shakespeare's career made into an exemplary fable about postmodernity, truth, and representation: he moves from a vigorous naiveté to a despairing cynicism to a hard-won, Žižekian understanding of the vexed but potentially productive relationship between ethical utterance and fantasy. I cannot help but wonder how

plays not discussed might complicate this *Bildungsroman*, but the individual readings enabled by this approach are smart and interesting.

The book's polemic against historicism (in the introduction and a short conclusion) involves two basic arguments. The first is that New Historicism, insofar as it proceeds by locating readings of canonical texts against backdrops provided by underexamined master-narratives of historical period, can really only be "history-lite" (196). The second, and perhaps more searching, critique of historicism is that it is an inherently pessimistic approach to the project of criticism in that it relies on "an undertheorized assertion that literature is not capable of producing truths that transcend a work's historical context" (199). Instead of framing his readings in historicist terms, then, each of Betteridge's chapters is framed with reference to the work of postmodern theorists, including Žižek, Copjec, Laclau, and Badiou. The point here is that we might as well ask the questions we are interested in asking instead of using historical difference as an excuse to avoid our own investments. Of course, a historicist might say that the book only proves, and not for the first time, that if you ask questions of Shakespeare's texts in postmodern critical vocabularies you will always get answers framed in the same manner. In general, since Betteridge's argument about Shakespeare's development is itself a constructed historical narrative, I would have preferred a less-polemical discussion of the ways in which historicism can and should operate within the kind of theoretically framed, ethical criticism here advocated.

The prose style of *Shakespearean Fantasy and Politics* is quite determinedly accessible and jargon-free. Its individual chapters would therefore make excellent classroom texts for undergraduates, and I imagine that this is part of the audience that the book is designed to reach. More advanced scholars may find the chapters under-researched as far as engagement with current Shakespeare studies is concerned. But they will also find plenty of provocative arguments here to make the book worth consulting.

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