

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY GINA BLOOM, WITH LEE EMRICH

Shakespeare Performance Studies. By W. B. Worthen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; pp. x + 253, 7 illustrations. \$99.99 cloth, \$80 e-book.
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Reviewed by Ellen MacKay, *Indiana University*

W. B. Worthen's new book, *Shakespeare Performance Studies*, might seem to announce a measured survey of the relation of one field of study to the other, in the vein of volumes with names like *Shakespeare and the Digital World* or *Shakespeare and Music*. Therefore know this: any easy reciprocity between Shakespeare and performance studies is as deliberately absent from Worthen's project as the conjunction is from his title. Instead, this is a book that arises from intransigence on both sides. Much of the second chapter details a strain of Shakespeare criticism that aims to redress an alleged underintellectual overvaluation of performance. With wonderful precision and panache, Worthen shows that scholarly hand-wringing over the exclusion of the "Literary Dramatist" (Lucas Erne's term) from critical discussions of Shakespeare not only misrepresents the firm grip of the author function on the field, but also misunderstands performance criticism to include readings that "rarely challenge[] the centrality of 'the text'" (36). Yet Worthen is no mere partisan in the book-versus-stage debate. An introductory chapter describes how the wide berth that Western drama receives from performance studies has helped entrench the misrecognition of the playtext as the score of the performed event. The paradigm Worthen prefers is Hans-Thies Lehmann's "postdramatic theatre" (6), though he has to correct its promodernist bias to lay the ground for his leading insight: that "'text-based' dramatic theatre has always been a mirage," since "most of what happens even in a conventional performance has no specification in the text at all" (7). The extensive literary and performance history of Shakespeare make his works ideal proving grounds for Worthen's investigation of this incommensurability and his demonstration of formal criticism's failure to take this "mirage" into account.

Worthen is perhaps the finest Shakespeare scholar working today on the "aleatory" relation of dramatic writing to theatrical meaning, and *Shakespeare Performance Studies* gives ample reason to engage the subject (29). The book offers a virtuosic, take-no-prisoners account of what critical approaches to Shakespeare get wrong about performance, threaded through a close examination of what three recent productions get right. For instance, the second chapter's takedown of the precariousness of Shakespeare-as-author is paired with a dazzling discussion of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Romeo and Juliet*, a New York-based, experimental production in which Shakespeare's script is reduced to the halting recollections acquaintances of the company's co-artistic director have of it. Against literary criticism's assertion that performance imposes a false

contemporaneity on Shakespeare's plays, Worthen finds that this production holds up to scrutiny the pedagogy of paraphrase and recitation that predominates in American schools. By "[d]edramatizing *Romeo and Juliet*" (78) it demonstrates how powerfully a "readerly consciousness" overtakes the reception of Shakespeare in performance, leaving Worthen to ask, in the tradition of Charles Lamb, whether there can ever be a Shakespeare "beyond the book" (79).

It's a smart provocation with which to set up his next chapter, on Punchdrunk Theatre's *Sleep No More*, a theatricalization of the world, but not the words, of *Macbeth*. To Worthen, the surprising feature of *Sleep No More* is its procrustean, literary approach to the play. He finds the McKittrick Hotel's warren of rooms, cluttered with materializations of *Macbeth*'s figurative conceits, makes the mental world of the play's characters so fixed and firm as to render interpretation beside the point. The methodology that Worthen holds accountable for a similar reification of interiority is cognitive science. His critique starts with Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, whose theory of cognitive blending excludes from perception the "representational conventions" of "narrative," "medium and genre," which is to say, the "cultural dimension" of art (105). In scholarship probing the theatrical implications of their research, "living in the blend" therefore becomes "living in the proscenium house," with performance at risk of returning to the narrowly mimetic and anodyne conception against which Brecht, among others, rebelled (107). Though Worthen scores his points ably here, he is uncharacteristically ungenerous about the explanatory value of cognitive approaches to theatre and performance studies. He reserves his extraordinary interpretive skill for a second pass at *Sleep No More* to show how the prison house of character is merely one half of a "dialectic" that the production orchestrates (146). In a *Macbeth* in which the play amounts to so much furniture, performance asserts its own unpredictable designs and rhythms, suggesting "conditions of meaning" and "knowing" that escape objectification (146).

Among its many achievements, *Shakespeare Performance Studies* is a model of how to write scholarship with and through performance. Worthen's last chapter is the culmination of his talent for understanding the work as its own best theorization. Since the critical lens under discussion in this section is media studies and the digital humanities more broadly construed, Worthen shifts his ground to the cinema, and to the representational technologies that parade across the screen of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*. Yet his focus remains theatrical performance, and in particular, the inadequacy of binaries like live versus recorded or archive versus repertoire to account for its affordances. The ingenuity of Almereyda's film, Worthen finds, is its use of dated communication platforms to bring out the play's collocation of media temporalities. In 1600, these include manuscript letters, printed books, and the conspicuously outmoded performance form of the dumb show; four hundred years later, Almereyda uses VHS tapes, Polaroid photos, and the protagonist's ubiquitous PXL2000 toy camera to prove that *Hamlet* is constituted as much by a wide range of performative "noise" as by textual "data" (153). Consequently, the play refuses to serve as the archaic, analog thing against which the digital world is defined. Instead, *Hamlet* demonstrates that "remaking, remediation, and obsolescence" are a heuristic borrowed from the dramatic stage (193).

Here and elsewhere, the density of Worthen's argument makes *Shakespeare Performance Studies* unsuitable to serve as the undergraduate companion or handbook that its title evokes. Rather, it is a work that should take center stage in university-level discussions about what performance means, and what it means to write about performance.

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Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre. By Richard Preiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; pp. x + 287, 11 illustrations. \$99.99 cloth, \$80 e-book.

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Reviewed by Stephen Wisker, *SUNY Buffalo*

Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre reflects a growing academic interest in the relationship between actors and audiences in Elizabethan theatre performance. Richard Preiss's excellent book offers a detailed analysis of that relationship and its profound change over the period. As Preiss argues, the early Elizabethan theatre confronted an unruly and entitled audience who expected to join in the proceedings. This audience was corralled by the clown, to whom they looked for commentary and engagement. (This clown figure is personified in *Hamlet's* Yorick, likely a tribute to the first great clown of the period, Richard Tarlton, still widely popular years after his death in 1588.) The book challenges the oft-accepted narrative that playwrights banished clowns from the theatre, arguing instead that the clowns themselves "bequeathed the new categories around which theatre would organize: the author, and the actor" (i). Preiss offers scholars of theatre history and performance practice a compelling analysis of pre-modern clowning and a bravura history of the birth of authorship on the English stage.

Preiss begins by admitting that his book is only "accidentally" about clowns, as he had set out originally to study authorship and audiences (1). Researching early modern theatre, Preiss found the figure of the stage clown to be pivotal: "where the audience was, so was the clown" (59). His book thus charts how theatrical authorship began "not with playwrights but with players themselves" and, specifically, the "entanglement of clown stage practice and print publication" (11). Against the centrality of the clown, the rapidly professionalizing Elizabethan theatre brought authors to prominence. Wrestling control from clown and audience alike, writers began to influence the theatrical experience so that audiences gradually perceived themselves as consumers of, instead of participants in, theatre. The theatre that emerges at the end of the early modern period effectively expunged the clown and accustomed its audiences to attend to an authored, mimetic performance. An emergent elite tradition was effacing a demotic one. For Preiss, this new theatre compelled English drama toward a fourth-wall conception of the theatrical event that was unimaginable to audiences just a few years before. Concordantly, the increased number and popularity of private indoor theatres