

Holger Schott Syme. *Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England: A Culture of Mediation*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiv + 284 pp. \$95. ISBN: 978-1-107-01185-4.

This is a book that, while lucid and learned, delivers rather less than it promises, and it must also be said that what it promises is not exactly clear. The subtitle suggests that the book is going to show that “mediation” is central to the culture of Shakespeare’s England. What this term seems to mean is that in this culture written

documents often took the place of direct first-person speech, and that such speech was often mediated through texts of various kinds. This is probably true, and not uninteresting. But what it signifies is unclear. It may testify to the growing literacy and bureaucratization of the society, but these are not the phenomena that interest the author. Syme wants to see the interaction between speech and writing in deconstructive terms — so that there is an indeterminate circuit (“endless deferral”) between them, and so that each is “always already” determined by the other. These formulations tend to metaphysicalize some fairly straightforward processes — which does not help the real scholarship in the book about specific courtroom and historiographical procedures. Moreover, the book does not want to take a skeptical view of the interactions it describes. It wants to see the culture as using these processes to establish rather than to endanger authority. I find this anti-skepticism congenial, but the deconstructive vocabulary works against it. And the book is supposed to help us understand the role of theater in this culture — not its popularity but, to use the key term again, its authority. But exactly what the authority of theater is never emerges clearly.

The really rich section of the book is its first chapter, on “live and scripted testimony in criminal prosecutions.” Here Holger Syme really has some original research and thoughtful analysis to contribute. He provides much interesting material on how testimony got into late Elizabethan courtrooms. Depositions had to be sworn, and they had to be sworn in front of witnesses, who would, in turn, swear that the deposition was taken down accurately and given by the person in question, and these written accounts, provided by justices of the peace, could take the place, when read in court by a clerk, of actual witnesses in criminal proceedings. Moreover, what the clerk read was not necessarily (or probably) a transcript of what the deponent said but a clerk’s summary of it. Obviously this picture can lead to skepticism about whether the original statement had any standing at all, but that is not where Syme wants to go. He wants to make the claim that such procedures “rendered the witness’s words *more* authoritative, *more* credible, and ultimately and paradoxically, more immediately truthful than the unmediated appearance of any live witness could ever have been” (63; italics authorial). Here again, the semi-deconstructive language doesn’t help — “immediately” and “unmediated” do not do any real work. The question of authority is in fact the right one, and the transmission through warranted authorities, with independent standing, is not necessarily a “paradoxical” way of adding credibility.

But where is Shakespeare in all this? The chapters between the first and the fourth, where a Shakespeare play, *Richard II*, is first discussed at length, are taken up with a demonstration that the way lawyers, Sir Edward Coke in particular, read and treated their texts was in line with general humanist practices — a point that doesn’t add much to the understanding of the legal procedures, and that diminishes their interest. This is followed by a generalized comparison of Jonson’s anxiety about theatrical representation and Shakespeare’s acceptance of the limits and powers of such — not much news here. The chapter on the deposition of Richard II is more interesting on the 1587 edition of Holinshed than on

Shakespeare. The culmination of the book is the chapter on *The Winter's Tale*. Here, the argument is that the play shows that immediate experience and "direct perception" are less reliable than the testimony of others (223, 225). But the problem with Leontes is not that he believes his own experience or perception but that he believes his own beliefs. Immediacy is not the issue; interpretation is. With regard to the final scene, Syme's contribution is to emphasize the prose scene of reported descriptions before it (5.2). That this scene is important to the plot is true. But that it does not primarily function as an introduction to the final scene is not. The perfectly valid point that description remains a crucial element in the final scene does not diminish the importance of the reunion with Hermione being staged. Again, a valid and straightforward perception is put forth as profoundly paradoxical.

So, in conclusion, I would say: read and learn from the legal and historiographical scholarship in this book. The culture might, in fact, look a bit different from this perspective. But Shakespeare doesn't.

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