NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Lisa Plummer Crafton
Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft
Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 162 p. £50.00.
ISBN: 978-1-4094-7905-5.

Although Mary Wollstonecraft is a familiar figure in Romantic studies, few have considered her work in terms of theatricality. Drawing attention to this gap, Crafton's study problematizes the idea of Wollstonecraft as anti-theatrical and offers a nuanced examination of the competing ideas of theatricality within her work, highlighting how she appropriates and interrogates the connections between theatre, culture, and self-representation.

Throughout, Crafton gives equal attention to Wollstonecraft's works and their theatrical contexts and influences. Chapters Two and Four examine *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), considering the respective influences of Nicholas Rowe's 1703 she-tragedy *The Fair Penitent,* and late-century trial discourses, including that of Marie Antoinette. The French Revolution is also the focus of Chapter Five which focuses on Wollstonecraft's immersion in revolutionary political discourse to show how theatricality unifies the unwieldy text, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794).

Chapter Three however takes a different focus, examining how questions about the moral utility of public spectacle shape *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Letters Written During a Short Residence* (1796). Chapter Six concludes the study with a discussion of transgressive potential in Sarah Siddons's performative self-fashioning, a discussion which, while interesting to theatre historians, only loosely connects to Wollstonecraft.

In the five running themes which Crafton outlines in Chapter One (essentially an extended introduction) – Romantic theatricality; the politicization of theatre/theatricalization of politics; masquerade; mimicry; and the theatre–performance divide – Crafton's debt to Romantic, theatrical, and feminist scholarship is evident. However this range of theoretical perspectives and her detailed attention to the scholarly field within each chapter limits the extent to which her own argument can be developed.

The book certainly makes an important claim for Wollstonecraft's place within explorations of Romantic theatricality, yet in covering such an extensive range of works, contexts, and theories it privileges breadth over depth, and so fails to articulate its argument as forcefully as it might. The absence of citations for a number of secondary source references can also be frustrating. Despite these drawbacks, Crafton's reconsideration of Wollstonecraft's contribution to and the influence of ideas about theatricality will make this a useful resource for scholars of both subjects, and her central argument about theatricality's potential to be both coercive and liberating deserves further attention.

HELEN E. M. BROOKS

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David Margolies
Shakespeare's Irrational Endings: the Problem Plays
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 192 p. £50.00.
ISBN: 978-023-027761-8.

In *Shakespeare's Irrational Endings* David Margolies makes the case for Shakespeare's problem plays. His is not the kind of retrospective reclassification made by such writers as Edward Dowden and F. S. Boas in the late nineteenth century, seizing on genres such as 'romance' to help explain away the interpretive challenges of the so-called 'problem' plays. Rather, Margolies argues that Shakespeare deliberately experiments with genre over more than a decade, and that while certain plays of this period conform to the expectations of genre in a strictly formal way, they elicit emotional responses from audiences and readers in conflict with their comic or tragic conclusions. Such 'irrational endings' produce their own pleasure, 'qualitatively different' from that produced by more conventional plays.

Margolies develops his argument through a reading of six plays, including three of the four identified by Boas in 1896 – *All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida* – and three less likely to strike many as generically challenged – *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and, most surprisingly, *Othello*. Although Margolies argues that Shakespeare improves his craft in the problem genre over time, the order of discussion does not reflect the chronology of Shakespeare's authorship, but rather begins with those plays that most obviously exemplify the 'problem'. As a result, the first three chapters, on *All's Well*, *Much Ado*, and *Measure*, contain the most persuasive arguments.

In his treatment of *Measure*, for example, Margolies's reading turns upon the somewhat commonplace observation that the marriages of the conclusion satisfy merely the formal requirements of comedy, and that Isabella's silent response to Duke Vincentio's marriage proposal is indicative of our own complicated reaction, which becomes the fissure through which Shakespeare's social criticism of legal and social attitudes to sex and marriage comes into view. If the argument is not unfamiliar, Margolies distinguishes it with fine attention to textual detail; for example, his treatment of the rhetorical nuances of different characters' speech is revelatory. This is where the book excels. Because of its lucidity, clarity, and textually focused detail, the discussion is ideal for undergraduates, which is not to undervalue its scholarship. Margolies provides many moments of gratifying explication – for example, of Shylock's desire for revenge in the context not of Elizabethan anti-Semitism, but of the revenger's role in contemporary revenge tragedy.

Margolies's case for the problem plays is unlikely to change the way editors or booksellers classify Shakespeare's plays. It might also be argued that the emphasis on audience response leads occasionally to normative assumptions about Shakespeare's historical audiences – how they must have responded, for example, to the 'unpleasantness inherent' in Claudio and Hero's marriage in *Much Ado* after Claudio's 'monstrous' behaviour. If, however, the occasional need for greater historical contextualization of Elizabethan audiences and readers is necessary, Margolies's insistence upon the importance of emotional response contributes usefully to a renewed critical interest in aesthetics and performance in early modern studies.

CARY DI PIETRO

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Chris Ritchie
Performing Live Comedy
London: Methuen Drama, 2012. 228 p. £14.99.
ISBN: 978-1-408-14643-9.

This is not really an academic book, instead being aimed at, in the author's words, 'all those playground and pub comedians who are ready to take the next step'. As such, it's the latest in a series of instructional manuals about comic performance published in the last couple of decades. This is a comparatively rare British example of the form (most are American), and it's also marked out by the fact that it covers not just stand-up but also related forms such as ventriloquism, drag, and double acts. The advice Ritchie gives is clear and simple. There are chapters on comic identity, character comedy, performance technique, material, audiences, and the business aspects of comedy. Some chapters include exercises and all finish with a recap, making this a very easy book to navigate.

There's an inherent problem with trying to sum up something as multifaceted and deceptively subtle as comic performance in a book that clocks in at under 250 pages, and this volume doesn't fully convey the rich variety of creative choices available to the live comedian. However, Ritchie does acknowledge other possibilities, particularly in a section on the 'anti-comedy' of acts like Ed Aczel. The book is informed by Ritchie's own experiences, both as a comedian and as the founder of Southampton Solent University's comedy degree, and there are subtle hints of academic awareness lurking underneath his plain-speaking guidance.

A number of things mark the book out from similar publications. Firstly, Ritchie takes an international approach, drawing examples not just from Britain and America, but also Jerusalem, Germany, and the Netherlands. Secondly, his own thoughts are supplemented by a series of interviews with performers, including Shazia Mirza, George Egg, Zoe Lyons, Mat Fraser, Henning Wehn, Raymond and Mr Timpkins, Davina Sparkle, and socialist conjuror Ian Saville. There's a pleasing variety here, with differences in gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and performance genre. The interview material is particularly useful in a section about the different methodologies comedians use to create their material. Thirdly, Ritchie introduces the concept of the 'microworld', defined as 'the world the individual comedian lives in while onstage', which is built up with each new joke and allows us to 'locate ourselves in . . . familiar territory'. This is a useful way of thinking about the imaginative world which the comedian creates in the mind of the audience, and arguably has value for academics as well as for would-be comics.

OLIVER DOUBLE

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Jerald Schwiebert
Physical Expression and the Performing Artist: Moving beyond the Plateau
Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
256 p. £34.95.
ISBN: 978-0-472-03416-1.

There are few movement books that capture a systematic experiential study of movement for performers as does this dynamic work. The author organizes his particular approach to movement and somatic training within a practical and theoretical framework with its underpinning in the Alexander Technique, Tai-Chi, and Pilates.

The first half of the book focuses on movement embracing four fundamental concepts: balance,