

Adam Max Cohen. *Wonder in Shakespeare*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. x + 226 pp. \$85. ISBN: 978-0-230-10541-6.

This is an unusual book, and a sad one. Adam Max Cohen was a young scholar with a promising career. He published two books on early modern technology, along with a number of other pieces, and had just received tenure at his institution when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor that threatened his life and left him unable to read. As his abilities returned under treatment, he drafted what is now the first half of this book, published posthumously along with six essays by friends and colleagues engaging his arguments in various ways. As a result of this unhappy history, the book has a divided structure and takes a series of bites at its subject rather than developing a fully worked out argument.

Cohen's chapters rehearse a variety of locations or sources for Shakespeare's recurrent interest in staging the wonderful, both as tragic awe and comic joy. In general, Cohen wants to make a case that Shakespeare's commitment to this emotion was not only developed in romances or tragedies, but was pervasive throughout his work, a constant element in his palette of feeling. No one, I think, will argue with this, and it is useful to have it restated. Cohen's brief chapters examine the resonance in Shakespeare of different available sources of wonder — Catholic mysteries, miraculous recoveries, portents and prodigies, *Wunderkammern*, Italian aesthetic theory — and remind us just how wide a net Shakespeare threw in seeking after wondrous effects. What these chapters don't manage, however, is to mediate between or adjudicate these rivals, being content simply to lay the varieties of wonder before us. Thus at several points, Cohen asserts that Shakespearean wonder is a substitute for a banned religious affect formerly to be found in the ceremonies of the old religion. Readers will recognize this argument as a version of one that has appeared in several recent critics, for instance in Stephen Greenblatt. But how this is related to imported Italianate neoclassical *admiratio* of the sort previously discussed by Peter Platt isn't made clear. Wonder is also an unruly, even intractable, emotion, and in both Cohen's section of the book and some of the essays that follow, it threatens to expand to almost any feeling experienced in excess.

An account of the relation of wonder to other emotions — or of early modern discussion of this topic — might have assisted with this. Cohen's chapters, lively and engaging as they are, could have used some extra braiding together to address such concerns, and often feel as though they break off without quite concluding. But one suspects time was terribly short, and even to have got this much work done in such difficult conditions is cause for celebration. In a moving introduction, Cohen describes what he felt to be his own miraculous recovery from the threshold of death, the emotional experience that clearly underlies much of his book, and recounts his struggles to engage with and teach his classes under his growing disabilities. His all too brief account of responding to Shakespeare as someone plunged suddenly into disorienting illiteracy is also fascinating — one wishes he had spoken more about it, given the predominance of the unlettered in Shakespeare's first audiences. His early death appears from this truncated meditation as a considerable loss to us.

The essays of Cohen's friends and colleagues that make up the balance of the book take off from various points of his argument, though none considers the argument as a whole or asks why Shakespeare should have been so committed to wonder. They are not all equally successful, and a couple are marred by a rebarbative critical language even on relatively straightforward topics, so that it's sometimes hard to discern what their argument actually is. The critical shibboleth that Catholics were wonder-prone and Protestants not also reappears. Some more nuance needs to be brought to this distinction: Protestants also had a lively and vigorous sense of the sublime, though they invested it differently, for instance in the Word of God. Joshua B. Fisher's essay on wonder and storytelling in *Othello* is perhaps the best of these pieces, though here too wonder stretches to fit all kinds of circumstances. Perhaps a counterterm like "mystification" would have enabled some useful distinctions. Unlike Cohen's chapters, the essays also contain not a few grammatical and usage errors, such as *enumerates* for *expounds*, or *denotes* for *notes*.

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