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'Finite Variety'

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Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays edited by Sara Munson Deats. Routledge, 2005. \$100. ISBN 0-415-96640-X

THIS VOLUME, number 30 in the Routledge 'Shakespeare Criticism' series, opens with the baffling statement from editor Sara Munson Deats, 'Of all Shakespeare's problematic plays, I find *Antony and Cleopatra* to be his most anamorphic drama' (p. 1). Her intention, presumably, is to imply that the play can be viewed from a multitude of critical and performance perspectives, an interpretation bolstered by her concluding comments that 'attitudes towards the play's contradictory figures, its ethos, its structure and its tone, like a vagabond flag upon a stream, have swayed back and forth, lacking the various critical tides, rotting themselves with motion' (p. 80). Anamorphic art, however, as Shakespeare understood, and as Deats evidently doesn't, presents not multiple viewpoints but 'perspectives, which rightly gaz'd upon | Show nothing but confusion; ey'd awry | Distinguish form' (*Richard II*, II. ii. 18–20). In other words, an anamorphic play would be one that appeared distorted, incomprehensible, and void of sense, save from a single, off-centre viewpoint.

There are those who would argue that *Antony and Cleopatra* presents just such a vision. Others, including Thomas Gentleman, Virgil K. Whitaker, and Samuel Johnson, would go so far as to deny the play any redeeming angle that might reveal its scattered scenes as a glorious whole. But that is not the view of this volume, which in large part shares the contemporary critical urge to find some form of compromised coherence and purpose in apparent contradictions and discontinuities. This is a collection that prefers to find a certain aesthetic wholeness in a dislimned and dissolving Antony, rather than to participate in Cleopatra's project to construct an illusory totality. Nonetheless, the line of sight this book provides is a partial one, offering a critical heritage of determinedly finite variety.

Both Deats's introduction (a survey of the play's critical and performance past) and contributor essays largely ignore theoretical and deconstructive approaches (and thereby also sidestep the question of the interpretative gestures possible 'after theory'). Nor is there any evidence of the Marxist or psychoanalytical approaches promised by the blurb on the Routledge

website (perhaps a problem with non-delivering contributors, as the site promises twenty original essays, while the volume contains only fourteen). Furthermore, there is little evident awareness of important recent work on textuality and textual transmission, or on the nature and limits of early modern authorship. A number of essays assert a naive intentionalism, with David Bevington (who has recently edited the play for the New Cambridge Shakespeare) apparently assuming that Folio stage directions are authorial, and Robert A. Logan peering over the playwright's shoulder to inform us that 'Shakespeare tends to regard those whom he reads or views with an eye toward practical aesthetics rather than applicable ethics' (p. 168), or that he 'rejects the moralizing of his sources, understanding that, for an audience, the experience itself is what counts, not abstract commentary about it' (p. 170).

These various omissions are symptomatic of the lack of critical self-consciousness that characterises many of these essays, and is most deeply felt in Deats's introduction, which, despite its length (it occupies 93 of the volume's 324 pages), offers little account of the chapters which are to follow. While Deats skilfully positions past critical endeavours within their political and cultural contexts, she makes no attempt to analyse the ideologies which underlie this text (often new historicist in tone, rarely strongly theorised, responsive to issues of performance but not of textual criticism). Nor does she scry into the possible futures of this play, whose past critical and stage fortunes have been so varied. Deats's detailed account of the play's critical and performance history also threatens at times to undermine the essays which follow, making them feel somewhat repetitive as they excavate a critical paradigm or performance fact which has already been amply described. The introduction is strong on performance history (though largely in descriptive mode), and provides a clear survey of many important moments in the play's critical past, using the Rome/Egypt dichotomy as a framework to explore a diverse range of approaches.

The opposition of the two empires, as Deats notes, structures many discussions of the play, and is invoked on numerous occasions in this volume. Self-consciously embracing his own 'Egyptian' stance, James Hirsh opens by multiplying and complicating the binary divides that have so often been traced within the play, helpfully pointing out, for example, that the real division is not between Roman masculinity and Egyptian femininity, but between the Roman drive to construct and police rigid gender categories (both male and female) and the mutability of sex and gender at Cleopatra's court. Placing himself firmly on the side of a richly facetious Egypt, Hirsh delicately unpicks previous critical accounts, skilfully demonstrating that the urge to construct binaries betrays a 'Roman' cast of mind, while delight

in variety is an Egyptian virtue: both critical positions are already described and legislated for within the play.

It is difficult to know where Hirsh would place co-contributor Dorothea Kehler, though her focus on the dynamics of performance and spectacle might suggest some inclination towards Egypt. Concentrating on two productions (those of Trevor Nunn for the RSC in 1972, and of Steven Pimlott for the same company in 1999), Kehler offers a resisting reading of Cleopatra's suicide, presented by Pimlott, she argues, as the ultimate sacrifice for love: a sacrifice which she draws into provocative dialogue with the Indian practice of *sati* (the self-immolation of widows). Moral relativists are likely to feel rather uncomfortable at Kehler's sweeping ahistoricism, and her elision of cultural difference; moral positivists are unlikely to believe that Pimlott's fault in presenting Cleopatra as a woman who kills herself, at least in part, because she has lost the man she truly loves is as culpable as the social, religious and sometimes physical coercion of a young widow into the flames of her husband's funeral pyre. There is a difference between Cleopatra's carefully researched final choice of an 'easy way' to die and the horror of being burnt alive, and between the Egyptian queen's political choice of Roman honour to avoid Roman degradation and the Indian widow's enforced (though sometimes also willed) submission to notions of marital and family credit and disgrace.

Kehler's piece finds a useful counterpart in Lisa S. Starks's suggestion that 'In *Antony and Cleopatra* it is the male hero ... who plays the martyr' (p. 244). Placing the play within a genealogy that includes Ovid, courtly love, Petrarchism, Mariolatry, and the cult of Elizabeth, Starks reads Antony's suicide as a fantasy of male erotic submission in which he pleads with one breath for his death and his mistress. Her argument is at its strongest when she plays with the various constructions of masculinity that structure the play and which informed its early modern reception, but becomes briefly less powerful when she moves to explore questions of race, as she assumes a black African Cleopatra who exists neither in Shakespeare's play nor in history (as both Kehler and Block point out elsewhere in the volume).

Sharing Kehler's focus on production, and returning to the recurrent binaries that haunt approaches to the play, David Fuller provides full descriptions of a series of important productions, including Samuel Barber's operatic adaptation, conceived as a fast-paced, almost neo-Elizabethan production, but mounted by the irrepressible Zeffirelli as 'a spectacular production on an almost cinematic scale, using over two hundred supernumerary actors; one hundred chorus members; forty-seven dancers; and animals, including horses, goats, and a camel' (p. 128). Commenting that the stage will not finally allow for a stern 'Roman view' of Cleopatra, the dominant figure in any production, Fuller opts for the transcendent conclusion

that, even when a director and cast are ostensibly occupied with the military and political structures of the play, it is the universal importance of passionate love that will speak most clearly as the essence of the drama.

Such a sweeping statement highlights a problem for performance studies, ignoring, as it does, the possibility that a performance may be received in highly diverse ways, even by an audience who have all witnessed the same performance. Even (or especially) critics and reviewers may express divergent opinions. In this volume, for example, Janet Suzman's 1972 *Cleopatra* is at one point described as 'only incidentally a voluptuary' (Kehler, p. 139), while at another we are told that Suzman made 'sensual charm a constant presence. In all the implications of sight and sound ... this *Cleopatra* was sensual' (Fuller, p. 121).

Perhaps it is in Georgia E. Brown's interview with Giles Block (director of a 1999 all-male *Antony and Cleopatra* for Shakespeare's Globe) that the critical urge to reduce performance to a single interpretation is most evident. Certainly it is here that we witness most clearly the tension between the desires of criticism and the desires of theatre professionals, as Brown's insistent and heavily directional questioning, which draws extensively on recent critical debate (and makes this the first interview I've seen in which the questions require footnotes), often reduces Block to monosyllabic responses: 'Yes, he does', 'Yes, that's true', 'Yes', and, 'Perhaps, but the story is key'. A clearer sense of what the volume or the reader might gain from discussion of a specific production might have clarified the focus of the questions, and allowed Block more freedom to discuss technical challenges and difficulties, as well as his sense of the key issues of the play, and of the strengths and weaknesses of both cast and text.

Perversely, some of the more traditionally literary-critical essays in the collection might helpfully be informed by an attention to performance. In his tour of the sources that inform and influence the play, salutary in its attention to omissions as well as to incorporations and adaptations, Robert A. Logan informs the reader that 'Octavius is coldly efficient and controlling, something of an automaton' (p. 169), a view that is undermined by Deats's earlier, detailed exploration of the recent performance trend to present an increasingly complex and human Caesar. In contrast, David Bevington's essay on 'The Visual Language of *Antony and Cleopatra*' helpfully draws together the concerns of staging and criticism by reading performance choices against textual clues (in both Shakespeare and Plutarch) and the historical contingencies of staging.

It is, however, historical contingency that Leeds Barroll evokes as the central loss of theatre studies, the haunting knowledge of the vanished performance. 'For even though the tangible aspect of the product defines our way of knowing ... we are aware of the limitations suggested for this particular (printed) product by the prospect of its hypothetical and theoretical

nonidentical twin, the performance in its time' (p. 276). Barroll's response to this crucial dilemma is to 'approach the script with a reading eye': an eye for close reading and textual detail, which can unpick clusters of images and ideas within the play, treating smaller episodes as 'quasi-autonomous' texts to be plundered for their rich associative contexts. As an example of what this might mean, Barroll goes on to offer a reading of the scene between the Clown and Cleopatra, a reading that ranges through biblical hermeneutics, popular literature and allusion, accounts of Circe and the *Voluptas* tradition, the myth of Hercules, and the potent association of beautiful women with personified lust.

In some ways, Barroll's piece might read as a manifesto for a number of the essays collected here. Chapters by Linda Woodbridge, Peter A. Parolin, Lisa Hopkins, Garrett A. Sullivan Jr., and Marguerite A. Tassi all seize upon particular textual moments (respectively references to gambling, food, gypsies, sleep, and painting), and use them as the starting point for tours through a diverse range of cultural and historical contexts, from the birth of modern capitalism (Woodbridge) to an alternative economics of consumption and feasting (Parolin), from epic, Romantic, and medical texts (Sullivan) to early modern tracts on painting (Tassi), and through the complex links between Egypt, Rome, gypsies, English and Scottish nationalisms, Ireland, and freemasonry (Hopkins). Woodbridge's contribution is a particularly lively one, with a welcome lightness of touch and tone.

What none of the essays in this collection offers is what Robert S. Knapp describes elsewhere as 'that old genre, the critical "reading"'.¹ Given that this expensive hardback is targeted primarily at the library and student market, this raises difficult pedagogical questions. Teaching a single text inevitably privileges its ontological wholeness, its status as a complete work that can be read through and interrogated for shades of meaning. Yet if, as this volume suggests, this is no longer what scholars do – if instead scholars prefer to employ particular moments, unique performances, and particular linguistic patternings as springboards to a dazzling array of other textual and contextual moments – how does this alter the ways in which we introduce students to texts and texts to students? How, especially, do we respond to this altered critical orthodoxy in departments which do not, or cannot, provide the searchable treasures of EEBO or LION?

New Critical Essays is a useful and thought-provoking collection, though not one that lives up to the general editor's aim (not cited in this volume) to 'give readers a balanced, representative collection of the most engaging and

¹ Robert S. Knapp, "'There's letters from my Mother; / What th'import is, I know not yet'", in David M. Bergeron (ed.), *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare* (Cranbury, London and Ontario 1996) p. 282.

thoroughly researched criticism on the given Shakespearean text'. This reader would have enjoyed a more substantial range of critical approaches and, crucially, would have liked to see some of the volume's provocations acknowledged and discussed. In refusing to reflect upon its own position within the critical field, the book, like the queen and the general enshrined in its title, comes to feel oddly nostalgic and sometimes rather backward-looking. Like Cleopatra, it refuses the Soothsayer's invitation to describe the future, and while the volume may be clearer-sighted than Antony and Cleopatra in its analysis of the past, and its examination of the conjunctions between criticism and ideology, it is less bold than the two lovers in struggling with the questions of its own place in that history, with who and what it is, and how it will be remembered.

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Putting London Centre-Stage

Tracey Hill

The First and Second Parts of King Edward IV by Thomas Heywood, edited by Richard Rowland. Manchester University Press, 2005. £47.50. ISBN 0 7190 1566 9

RICHARD ROWLAND'S EDITION of Thomas Heywood's two-part play of 1599 is a substantial achievement of scholarship. Not only does it make this important exemplar of the late sixteenth-century history play available to a wider readership than has hitherto been possible (this is the first edition of the play since 1874), but it does so with considerable authority.

With the uncertainty about the succession, not to mention the *fin-de-siècle* anxieties brought about by the prospect of the end of the sixteenth century itself, the ten years or so preceding the end of the long reign of Elizabeth I produced a large number of plays on historical subjects. Indeed, history was such a preoccupation at this juncture that the Elizabethan authorities tried to clamp down on historical and satirical works in the year in which this play was first produced. Heywood's *Edward IV* therefore sits within an established cultural trend. But, unlike some other perhaps better-known plays of the period, this text represents a civic as much as a national history.