American Shakespeare
ISSN 2283-8759
DOI: 10.13133/2283-8759/17653
pp. 396-421 (2021)

Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Bigliazzi, Silvia, ed., *Oedipus at Colonus and King Lear: Classical and Early Modern Intersections*, *Skenè Studies* I, 2, Verona, *Skenè Theatre and Drama Studies*, 2019, 450 pp.

This collection of essays edited by Silvia Bigliazzi aims to investigate a multifaceted universe of classical and early modern intersections between Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, then expands this network of intersections to include contemporary adaptations, remediations and rewritings. The choice of focusing exclusively on the events staged by Sophocles and its intertextual/interdiscursive echoes in Shakespeare's tragedy derives from the fact that "*OC* [*Oedipus at Colonus*] is the only play showing Oedipus outside Thebes, an errant exile, accompanied by his daughter Antigone, and at a later stage rejoined by Ismene" (p. 12), thus recalling Lear's condition of exile and vagabond after ceding his reign to his daughters Goneril and Regan. Sophocles shows "Oedipus' experience of liminality […] between the condition of being 'somebody' and its negation, as well as his experience of being on the verge of life's end" (p. 13), the same liminality experienced by the Shakespearean character. What can be appreciated from the outset, however, is the fact that the editor of this volume honestly admits that intersections between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* remain intersections, as the two tragedies "are neither demonstrably nor categorically linked in any

intrinsic manner" (p. 18), yet they may testify to the interdiscursive circulation of Sophoclean themes and topics in early modern England.

The book is divided into four sections ("Being Classical", "Oedipus", "Oedipus and Lear", "Revisiting Oedipus and Lear"), each containing essays (seventeen in total) by scholars of classics, the early modern English period and performance studies. Part one contains only two articles – Orgel's and Bajetta's – about the notion of 'classics' in early modern England. Although choosing to include two articles about 'being classical' in early modern England and then dedicating part two to the analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus* may be debatable and confusing, the first section of essays can be considered an introductory *trait d'union* between the other parts, thus paving the way for sections two, three and four from a methodological point of view and a unifying research question. Orgel's "How to Be Classical" and Bajetta's "Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh's Classics: The Case of Sophocles" are framed within a peculiar dialogic position where the theoretical and methodological premises of the former are applied to the specific case study presented in the latter – i.e., "Elizabeth's [alleged] enjoyment of Sophocles" (p. 77). What emerges from the two first articles is a pivotal crux that meanders throughout the whole book and that concerns the linguistic barrier that prevented many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English intellectuals from reading the original Greek texts without any Latin intermediary.

Part two offers interesting and original investigations of Sophocles' text itself. "Revisiting *Oedipus at Colonus*" by Slatkin is a provocative article that presents the old Theban king "as a self-reviser, one who has been through cognitive, emotional, and ultimately ethical arcs, reinterpreting the meaning of past individual (and collective) actions and reactions, and individual (and collective) traumas" (p. 93). Actions and reactions, and individuality vs. collectiveness are antithetical yet complementary binomials considered by Slatkin. Antitheses and complementarity of opposites are also fundamental to Ugolini's article, "A Wise and Irascible Hero: Oedipus from Thebes to Colonus", the opposites being wisdom, on the one hand, and short temper, on the other. This coexistence of these two apparently opposing sides of his

personality makes Oedipus an ambiguous character. Ambiguity is also a primary focus of "Some Notes on Oedipus and Time" by Avezzù, an ambiguity linked to the passing of time and questions of agency, ranging from "doing" in *Oedipus Rex* to "being made to do" in *Oedipus at Colonus* (p. 119). The irascibility dealt with by Ugolini was closely linked to Oedipus' remembrance of his painful past; in Avezzù this same painful past is connected with "long duration (*makros chronos*)" (p. 139), "not a merely predictable succession of days, but of a life-span corresponding to a superior design" (p. 137). "Liminality, (In)accessibility, and Negative Characterization in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*" by Lupi, perhaps methodologically the most distant article of this group, yet astonishingly interesting and thought-provoking, approaches stylistic issues to demonstrate "a parallel negative characterisation of both the hero, Oedipus, and the place where Oedipus is bound to station in the play, […] Colonus", through "linguistic evidence that appears to have been intentionally disseminated by Sophocles throughout the play" (p. 147). In order to accomplish his task, Lupi recurs to negative lexical items and complex syntactic structures and coherently applies stylistic evidence to demonstrate both Oedipus' and Colonus' negative characterisation, as well as Sophocles' undeniable linguistic skills (especially in the section devoted to hapaxes). The last article of this section, Bierl's "*Oedipus at Colonus* as a Reflection of the *Oresteia*: The Abomination from Thebes as an Athenian Hero in the Making", delves into a comparison, already hinted at by Slatkin (pp. 94-97), between Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Aeschylus' trilogy, i.e., the *Oresteia*. The focus of this article is again on "triggering reflections about the larger political and social situation in the audience on the level of myth and ritual" (p. 170), always in the light of a certain ambiguity and evident antitheses – which Bierl calls "polarity", "duality" and "tensions" – such as "the quintessential dichotomy between Thebes and Athens" (p. 171) or "between the dreadful dimension of death and euphemistic names to veil it, between mythic scenarios of anger, curse, hate as well as cultic blessing and plenty" (p. 192).

Part three opens with Miola's article about the early modern reception of Sophocles' tragedy ("Lost and Found in Translation:

Early Modern Receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus*"), an accurate reconstruction of the play's fortune and 'Christianisation' in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, from Marliani's and Erasmus' collections of proverbs and *sententiae* to Melanchthon's Latin translations of Sophocles and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Miola's fundamental contribution bridges a historical, philological and cultural scholarly gap and systematises issues of reception, translation and adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy in early modern England. The next five articles by Murnaghan, Schein, Beltrametti, Bigliazzi and Lucking scrutinise different points of contact between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, foregrounding an undeniable interdiscursive network of echoes and parallels that allow us to read Shakespeare through Sophocles and Sophocles through Shakespeare. If in her "'More sinned against than sinning': Acting and Suffering in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*" Murnaghan focuses on differences and similarities between the two plays in terms of the linguistic (wordplay, use of the passive instead of the active voice, etc.) and rhetorical representation of the two old protagonists, Schein's "Fathers Cursing Children: Anger and Justice in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*" focuses once again on binary oppositions (as seen in part two), this time analysing the tensions between Oedipus' and Lear's anger towards their children, and a sense of justice that in Sophocles' is "a justice that features a special intimacy and ultimate harmony between the human and the divine", whereas Shakespeare "affirms neither divine justice nor any emotionally satisfying or intellectually meaningful relationship between divinity and humanity" (p. 248). Both Beltrametti and Bigliazzi deal with the notion of time in *Oedipus* and *Lear*, but from two different yet non-mutually exclusive perspectives. "Oedipus' εἴδωλον, 'Lear's shadow' (*OC* 110, *King Lear* 1.4.222)" by Beltrametti broadens the panorama of intersections to all Sophocles' Theban play, thus perceptively interpreting *King Lear*'s time of the narration as the early modern English version of the events occurring in the space-time between *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* as follows: "[t]he themes and even the characters of the Greek dramatist seem to inhabit the deep structures of Shakespeare's tragedy, which could almost be considered as a

reworking of the Theban plays in an Elizabethan key" (p. 268). Starting from the premise that "[p]erhaps in no other Shakespearean tragedy as in *King Lear* a sense of the complexities of time conflating origin and ending in the 'now' […] invades the play from its very outset" (p. 292), Bigliazzi's article ends up being the perfect 'counter melody' to Avezzù's "Some Notes on Oedipus and Time", paralleling this latter's distinction between Oedipus' time of "doing" and "being made to do" with Lear's "new beginning", the division of his reign into three which "creat[es] the time of new genealogies, but also, contrariwise, the no-time of Cordelia's symbolic death – and soon of Lear himself. It is both a genesis and its reverse" (p. 300). The final article of this third section, Lucking's "'More than two tens to a score': Disquantification in *King Lear*", although it does not consider Sophocles' *Oedipus* and its connections with Shakespeare's *Lear* at all, approaches the theme of division from a different perspective than Bigliazzi's. Lucking's reading of *Lear* gravitates around the notion of value in a purely mathematical sense. According to Lucking, the language of commerce and mathematical imagery are both nullifying forces, since the king self-deprives of his kingdom, and elements highlight "impetus towards unification" (p. 332) when Cordelia comes back from France.

Lastly, part four comprises four essays about adaptations and rewritings of both/either *Oedipus at Colonus* and/or *King Lear*. This group of articles opens with Pasqualicchio's "Happy Endings for Old Kings: Jean-François Ducis' *Œdipe* and *Léar*" which analyses 'bridges', as the author calls them, between Ducis' *Œdipe à Colone* (1797, preceded by *Œdipe chez Admète* in 1778 and 1792) and *Le Roi Léar* (1783), the French playwright being "the only dramatist to write works inspired both by the theme of *Oedipus at Colonus* and by the story of *King Lear*" (p. 342). Spence's "Shades of *King Lear* in Beckett's Theatre and Late Work" examines Beckett's works from the 1950s and 1960s and how most are influenced by Shakespearean tragedy by reason of Beckett's well-known obsession with "the limits of language" that also "pervades *King Lear* in multiple forms" (p. 369). The story of Oedipus comes back in Dobozy's moving essay, "Sam Shepard's 'Body' of Tragedy", which compares the American playwright's 2016 *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*,

a play which "focus[es] on the diseased body in light of its source texts – Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*" (p. 404) – with its author's advanced ALS that led to his death the following year. Lastly, "Opening up Discoveries through Promised Endings: An Experimental Work in Progress on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*" by Nicholson and Sidiropoulou is an informative, review-like article describing and commenting on a theatrical project "co-produced and co-directed by the authors in Verona, Italy, in Spring, 2018" (p. 414), which staged some scenes from *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, thus creating, as the authors call it, a "particular kind of *contaminatio*" where "[d]eliberate, risk-taking hybrids and paradoxes abound" (p. 415).

Far from being the expected, predictable book about the reception of the classics in early modern England, the originality of this essay collection lies in having chosen to focus on two specific tragedies, i.e., Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which are not inextricably correlated yet share "intersections" (to quote from the book's title). This choice of a specific, restricted – also niche – content allows the volume's contributors to scrutinise the full array of potentials offered by the two plays' interdiscursive network within a wide range of coherent methodological frameworks whose application reveals that the links of this network are even tighter than as hypothesised in Bigliazzi's introduction.

Fabio Ciambella, Sapienza University of Rome

Gajowski, Evelyn, ed., *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 392 pp.

The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism offers an extensive array of critical approaches to Shakespeare by some of the most distinguished international academics who chart key developments and innovations in this composite field between the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The book contains twenty chapters, arranged chronologically, each providing an extensive description and history of a particular

critical practice with its underlying theoretical assumptions. Each chapter closes with useful examples of the possible application of the critical approach through a brief analysis of a Shakespearean text, thus actually showing the theory in practice. Helpful appendices at the end of the book clarify important terms, schools of thought, and provide an exhaustive annotated bibliography, making this handbook truly accessible even for those who are not familiar with the developments in critical theories.

As the editor, Gajowski, indicates in the introduction, the book traces the evolution of theoretical developments that evolved in response to "traditional liberal humanism" (p. 3), with the object of reaching conclusions or making assumptions as to how we characterize Shakespeare studies today, but also to clarify affinities and tensions among these approaches. It will be interesting to note, for instance, that many of the most recent trends owe much to the preceding – and apparently discarded – critical approaches. The other implicit question which emerges from this collection of articles is, of course, that of the role of the critic: how much of the critic's own subjectivity enters a critical analysis? Is it right that it should? Is it possible, or even useful, to concentrate solely on the object of study?

The first part of this collection of essays is labelled "Foundational Studies" and includes close reading, genre and character studies, approaches which had seemed to be dismissed but, as these articles show, have rather been renovated and refreshed. Genre studies, for instance, which traditionally dealt with the formal properties or stylistic norms of a text, are shown to include now the study of the fluid nature of genre, adopting historicist and feminist perspectives. The first "challenges to traditional liberal humanism" appear in the second section, which covers the 1970s and 1980s; in this section the fundamental elements of this approach – the nature of the subject, of reality and language – are questioned, by opposing, instead, the idea of a constructed, rather than essential, human being. This portion of the book includes Marxist, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist and psychoanalytic studies, and examines the impact of the pioneering works of scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Coppélia Kahn and others. What links

these approaches is essentially the idea of a decentred human subject together with an opposition to hierarchy; in the case of Marxism and cultural materialism, notably, the assumption that the human subject is exclusively upper class, in the case of feminism solely male. Marxism, particularly, as the essays which follow show, plants the roots for the blossoming of new historicism, cultural materialism and presentism which we will come to. The interesting article on feminist studies, which recommends a resistance to homogenization and, as with many articles in this book, suggests a plurality which denies the possibility that a single prescriptive approach may resolve any critical interpretation, offers as its case study an analysis of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and the "doctrinal fetishization of her chastity" (McCall, p. 112), a critique classified as "presentist-feminist", a title which emphasizes the intersectionality of critical approaches constantly at play. The article concluding this section traces psychoanalytic approaches to Shakespeare beginning with Freud but expanding into the works of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott; the adaptability of these developing concepts is shown in an interesting reading of *As You Like It* which proposes the lens of sadomasochism for an interpretation of the play and particularly for the character of Rosalind.

The question of 'otherness' which had emerged in postmodern critical practices reaches its apex with the development of critical race, postcolonial and queer studies, which form the third section of the book, "Matter of Difference". As the editor puts it: "Even as cultural materialist studies and feminist studies challenge the premises of traditional liberal humanism on the basis of class difference and gender difference, respectively, so in turn critical race studies, postcolonial studies and queer studies destabilize the challengers themselves" (p. 7), and prioritize the voices of people of colour, colonized people and all those with diverse sexual orientations. The chapter on postcolonial studies, for example, focuses on how Shakespeare has been used as an instrument of domination and draws from theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, thus giving the reader, as most of these chapters do, a clear picture of the 'state of the art' but at the same time opening up possible paths for the future of

Shakespeare studies which must take into account issues of political nature which inform colonialism, ethnicity, hybridity economics and the like. In the approach to queer studies, surprisingly, the play taken into consideration is *Much Ado About Nothing*, a traditionally 'straight' play in which what is highlighted is the dramatization of homosociality, desire and gender roles.

In part four of this collection, we reach "Millennial Directions", where the practices appear more innovative, though most still evolve out of those we have seen at the close of the twentieth century. Apart from computational studies, which involve the use of analytical-digital tools in order to process large quantities of data through specific algorithms, and have been successfully applied to Shakespearean texts allowing the detection of linguistic patterns or style which have contributed significantly to the determination of Shakespeare's canon chronology, the other theories proposed can be seen to rise from concerns which originate from outside of the academic world and therefore "emphasize the inevitable embeddedness of the text in its political, social, and economic context" (Gajowski, p. 9). Ecocritical studies, which in their simplest terms involve the treatment of nature, are explored through their major orientations which include environmental history, but also ecofeminism and posthuman theory. The latter two will appear in the concluding part of this book, but it is useful to clarify here what is intended: ecofeminist studies analyse the modes by which relationships between humans and other-than humans affect social injustices whereas posthumanism aims at decentring the human from its superior position with respect to other forms of nature. Ecocriticism, then, not only accentuates the problems related to natural calamities but also invites audience and readers to take action. The chosen play to which the theory is applied is *Coriolanus*, which dramatizes, among others, problems over food shortages, famine, struggle for water, and generally can be read through the lens of ecology. Another critical branch contained in this section is that of spiritual studies, which investigates the concept of spirituality or theology comparing current spiritual-critical practices to those of earlier scholars and delving into the possibility of recognizing Shakespeare's own position through his use of the Bible and other spiritual sources.

Presentist and global studies close this penultimate section, and the former is traced back to cultural materialism and the work of Terence Hawkes. Presentism, perhaps more evidently – or more challengingly – leads us back to our initial question concerning the role and the function of the critic, in that it maintains that the positionality of the critic cannot, but mostly, should not, be circumvented. The role of Shakespeare, then, should be considered in the here and now, and the only way to 'make meaning' with Shakespeare is to view him in the current political and social times. Rather than being opposed to a historicist perspective, it supplements it, extending it to the moment in which the critic is writing; in fact, the examined text in this article focuses on Shakespeare's much discussed contribution to *Sir Thomas More* seen in the framework of Brexit and of the refugee emergency. Global studies, broadly speaking, encompass issues which go beyond the national, adopting an interdisciplinary methodology which tackles questions related to politics, economics, ecology and generally spans across geographic and cultural spaces. The subjects include race and gender studies, and of course postcolonial issues, but unlike the latter they move beyond the customary criticism of Western hegemony and the reactions of previously colonized countries, moving towards the effect of Shakespeare reception in a global context. Films and performances throughout the world are studied in order to construct, or reveal, "Shakespeare as a cosmopolitan brand" (Gajowski, p. 12).

Finally, in the last articles, attention is turned to "Twenty-First-Century Directions", namely, disability, ecofeminist, posthumanist and cognitive ethology studies. Disability studies revise previous assumptions on disability, most famously those which considered physical disability as a sign of guilt or moral evil, as in the case of Richard III, and consider how analyses of Shakespearean texts can question those notions. The chosen play to illustrate the theory is, apparently paradoxically, one which does not present disabled characters, *Romeo and Juliet*. The choice is determined by the fact that it offers deep understanding into ideologies of ability, and at the same time "asks us to understand disability as a problem of agency, expressed in the body's lapses" (Williams, p. 275). The theory derived from cognitive ethology closes this selection of

contributions. Possibly partly overlapping with posthumanism in its critical application, the theory studies animal behaviour from an evolutionary point of view and through it examines human psychological processes as inherited characteristics shaped by natural selection. Human behaviour, from this point of view, is therefore the result of traits we have absorbed from our predecessors, attitudes adopted in order to deal with dangers and the natural environment. Its critical application to Shakespeare studies is exemplified through an analysis of *Hamlet* which aims at putting the theory into practice through an investigation of mechanisms of memory and of mimicry and the automatic responses to language and events. The author of the last essay, Dionne, concludes: "In his most profoundly self-reflexive play, Shakespeare explores the thin line that separates the human from its imagined primate original. And in the graveyard […] it is hard not to see the 'prating' and 'ranting' of its two central heroes behaving like hooting monkeys throwing handfuls of dirt in their rhetorical pantomimes" (p. 316).

One aspect which is less apparent in this collection of essays is language-based critical analysis (though computational studies go in that direction), a rapidly growing field in Shakespeare studies which may, in the future, enhance a 'return to the text' in its more specific nature. In the last decades, in fact, as we have seen, literary criticism has mostly derived from the social and cultural climate of the time, and this prompts readers to interrogate themselves over what new paths will be taken by Shakespearean criticism, whether the trend will continue and if new theories in "accents yet unknown" rising outside of academia will sooner or later be applied to Shakespeare, which inevitably remains a touchstone for the 'testing' of any literary critical theory.

In conclusion, this book offers multi- and inter-disciplinary critical approaches and is an essential compendium for researchers and scholars, or indeed for anyone involved in Shakespeare studies. Its exhaustiveness and accessibility are probably its greatest asset. At the same time, as mentioned before, it poses important questions on the functions of critical theory: some authors seem to privilege an approach through the lens of contemporaneity whilst others find it more fruitful to interpret the

Shakespearean text in the light of its own time. Mostly, the different contributions imply that these methodologies, together with others exposed here, have become inextricably linked.

Maria Valentini, University of Cassino and Southern Lazio

Hartley, Andrew James and Holland, Peter, eds, *Shakespeare and Geek Culture*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 336 pp.

This edited collection of essays, whose seeds were sown at the homonymous 2017 Shakespeare Association of America seminar led by Andrew James Hartley and Peter Holland, takes its cue from previous studies on Shakespeare and current popular culture. Approximately twenty years ago, Douglas M. Lanier, who was later to contribute a riveting book chapter to *Shakespeare and Geek Culture*, accepted Holland's invitation to write precisely one of such studies for the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series. It is on Lanier's definition of his object of study as "what is often dismissed as Shakespearian kitsch" (*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 3) that Holland, in his turn, seems to elaborate in an attempt to clarify the scope of "Shakespeare geek culture", which, he writes in the final essay of the collection, "takes pleasure in the kitsch, the ephemeral, the obsessive, the fringe, the enjoyable pointless manifestations of that cultural engagement with Shakespeare […] which we used to be told were irrelevant to scholarship" (p. 303). Building upon Lanier's and others' investigations of 'Shakespop', the nineteen contributors have joined forces to explore "the interplay between Shakespeare and geek culture in its disparate forms" (Hartley and Holland, p. 9), hence paying due attention to "aspects of popular culture with which much Shakespeare criticism, the main stream, has not yet concerned itself" (Holland, p. 303).

Drawing upon several fields of study (media, film, game, adaptation and fan studies, among others), this rather heterogenous volume comprises eighteen chapters which are loosely grouped into four sections ("Geek Culture and Fiction", "Geek Culture and the Shakespeare Sandbox", "Pastimes, Gaming

and Shakespeare", "Film, Theatre and Geek Culture") and "enact various forms of cultural studies" (Hartley and Holland, p. 9) within the common framework established by the editors' introductory reflections. Most essays specifically focus on predominantly post-1990s Shakespeare-related cultural products, including fantasy novels (Pivetti), graphic novels and comic books (Leverett; Martinez; Lanier; Sasser), 'choose your own adventure' books (Pope), films (Botelho; Flaherty), fan texts (O'Neill; Fazel and Geddes), video games (Bushnell) and board games (Dickson). In successfully combining different disciplinary approaches to a remarkable variety of objects of study, the book usefully works towards mapping Shakespeare's pervasive presence in contemporary popular culture.

Not all chapters, however, revolve around specific instances of adapted or appropriated Shakespeare. Several essays discuss far-reaching topics and issues, such as cultural ownership and adaptation (Hartley), the position of the humanities professor in educational culture (Kozusko) and the gender bias against complex female characters that equally affects much Shakespeare criticism and geek culture (McCall). Laying greater emphasis on the Shakespearean canon (the plays rather than the poems, to be sure), some contributions attempt to highlight how the unfamiliar lens of the geek might be used to reconsider familiar texts and problems. At the end of part one, for example, in an effort to reveal "what science fiction affords the study of Shakespeare", Andrew Tumminia contrasts Shakespeare's histories (especially *2 Henry VI*) with a few episodes of the animated series *Adventure Time* (2010-18) on the basis of their different displacement of "the problems of the present" (pp. 82-83). In part four, James D. Mardock intriguingly suggests that we imagine early modern "dramatic characters as having had their own fan bases" and evaluate "the influence of hardcore fans, of geeks, alongside that of the companies, poets and censors", with a view to "expand[ing] the range of answers to certain questions" in the history of early modern theatre (p. 291). If Mardock anachronistically yet perceptively frames *King Lear* as "the 'gritty reboot' of the Lear legend" (p. 290), another notable contribution that similarly turns to one of Shakespeare's plays and interprets it in a new light is Matt Kozusko's "On Eating Paper and

Drinking Ink", which juxtaposes the "character" of "the Shakespeare professor" ("the otiose academic who populates stories about the failures of higher education today") with Holofernes ("one of Shakespeare's most fantastic geeks" [p. 170]) in *Love's Labour's Lost* ("a celebration of *otium* and geek-level obsession with rhetoric and verbal dexterity and poetry" [p. 178]). Kozusko's essay truly offers us "a moment of self-reflection such as we rarely allow ourselves", thus clearly exemplifying how the volume is also concerned "with the geekiness of Shakespeare scholarship itself" (Hartley and Holland, p. 3), for, the editors point out, "we academics are geeks/nerds" to some extent (p. 8).

Chapter after chapter, this essay collection makes a convincing case for the careful study of the crossroads between Shakespeare and geek culture while providing a valuable example of how those interconnections may be rewardingly examined from a vast array of perspectives. Drawing attention to the "increasing centrality to the internet-driven culture of the twenty-first century" (p. 10) of what the various contributing authors broadly define as "geek culture", the book successfully demonstrates the mutual relevance of the "two apparently separate entities" juxtaposed in the title (p. 1). As shown by the wide range of products and practices analysed throughout the volume, "Shakespeare is a common ingredient in geek culture used to elevate and complicate it and that relationship is reciprocal", for "geek culture, in turn, makes Shakespeare relatable to a broader audience" (McCall, p. 227). Shakespeare has not ceased to serve as "a jumping-off point, a locus of creativity, a wealth of material" which can be "easily used and adapted to match new media and new audiences" (Dickson, pp. 200-1), also because he "adds a degree of respectability through […] his cultural capital, thus amplifying the new works' promotability" (Martinez, p. 65). In this light, it does not seem unreasonable to share the editors' hope that their common endeavour "represents the first unified salvo of what will be a new sub-movement within Shakespeare studies" (Hartley and Holland, p. 9).

Shakespeareans who wish to continue the admirable work of this essay collection may well resume from one pivotal though difficult-to-answer question that the volume ultimately leaves open – a bit too open, some might believe, even for such an exploratory

study – namely, what is 'geek culture' (and, conversely, what isn't)? Because of the current semantic instability of the word "geek", the editors begin by acknowledging the possibility of identifying a geek based on "*how* they like" ("That *how* is exuberant, all-encompassing, gloriously, unreasonably detail-oriented, ungoverned in its pursuit of what seems interesting; it's about love, and it reminds us of the fanatical roots of fandom") as well as on "*what* they like" (p. 8), i.e., "their subcultural interests" comprising "those subjects falling under the umbrella of science fiction and fantasy" (p. 4). However, we are left with a moving target throughout the book until Holland eventually requests, in his solo essay, that we "accept the broad and expanding semantic field within which each of the chapters […] found their place" for lack of "one agreed definition" (p. 295). In fact, a few contributions do push the definition of the term "geek". Perhaps, not every reader of this volume will find M. Tyler Sasser's tentative inclusion of "scouting culture" in "a larger American geek culture" (p. 207) wholly convincing. Regardless of whether one is willing to treat scouts as geeks or not, however, Sasser's "The Bard of *Boys' Life*: Shakespeare and the Construction of American Boyhood" remains a highly informative essay which has the merit of foregrounding the ideological implications carried by "the appearance of Shakespeare, even when those appearances are seemingly simple and innocuous" (p. 221). Difficult though it is to pinpoint the shifting meaning of words such as "geek" and its cognates, future studies picking up from where the collection leaves off may well follow its lead in attempting to answer the definition issue.

On the whole, the critical enquiry into the multifarious intersections of Shakespeare and geek culture promises to be a fruitful endeavour, for which the collection of essays edited by Hartley and Holland provides a convenient starting point. The main strength of this newly born "sub-movement" appears to be its considerable potential for enriching our collective understanding of contemporary Shakespeares and Shakespeareans, as well as of Shakespeare's oeuvre and early modern theatre as viewed from the original standpoints of the geek. Of course, if this concerted effort is commendable, it is not because of the fascinating, but very unlikely, possibility that the word "geek" was invented by

Shakespeare in *Cymbeline*, V.iv (Holland, pp. 304-5) – the occurrence is considered a transmission error for "gecke" by the OED and is used by Holland as a deliberate, tongue-in-cheek reference in the title of his essay – but because geek culture has become crucial to present-day popular culture and Shakespeare continues to enjoy immense prestige within it.

Paolo D'Indinosante, Sapienza University of Rome

Hatchuel, Sarah and Vienne-Guerrin, Nathalie, eds, *The Merchant of Venice: A Critical Reader*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 320 pp.

Not only is *The Merchant of Venice* one of the most famous of Shakespeare's plays, it is also one of the most controversial and problematic. Significantly, perhaps, the title page of the first Quarto does not refer to a comedy, but to a more neutral "Historie of the Merchant of Venice", even though, technically speaking, the play belongs rightfully to the comic genre. Its problematic nature resides in the rather awkward concept of 'harmony' that is reached at the end of the play, and that has elicited endless critical debate ever since. Famously, the play also attracted Freud's attention, who devoted an essay to the ancient and recurrent motif of the lovers' choice ("Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl", 1913).

The ongoing debate as well as the state of the art is thoroughly documented in this recent critical reader edited by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, where eight essays plus a comprehensive introduction by the two editors address the most relevant issues now at stake with *The Merchant*. The rationale behind this fortunate Arden Early Modern Drama Guides series, reaching with this the twenty-fourth volume (with "[f]urther titles […] in preparation"), follows from the premise, stated by the series editors, that the need is now deeply felt to "bridge the gap between accounts of previous critical developments and performative history and an acquaintance with new research initiatives" (p. ix). This principle informs the structure of all volumes of the series, which open with a sweeping introduction foregrounding the matter, and follow with three structural chapters devoted to a

recognition of the classical critical work on the subject (here by John Drakakis), to the play in performance (Jay L. Halio), and to the state of the art, which centres on the vicissitudes of the play, in general terms, throughout the new millennium (Shaul Bassi). Then, new life is breathed into the play by the "New Directions" session (Sabine Schülting; Janice Valls-Russell; Gary Watt; Douglas M. Lanier), which deals with the thorniest sides of the dramatic matter.

Naturally enough, the problem now with the Shakespeare industry is to account for what happened in the past and for the ever-growing net of performative and critical directions that accrete mercilessly every single day. In a way, the traditional paper, or print, publication seems inadequate to keep pace with a market that not only stretches in multiple directions, but that constantly "articulate[s] new meanings and readings of the play that mainstream criticism from the Anglosphere may not have thematized" (Bassi, p. 103). Perhaps the day is near when entrusting one's own speculative efforts on Shakespeare to paper and ink will appear romantically obsolete. If so, this Arden series fights strenuously against the passing of time. Its explicit two-faced-Janus approach, with an eye on the past and the other on contemporaneity, reaches a practical balance between the needs of the scholar and those of the student, as the conclusive chapter by Lieke Stelling devoted to learning and teaching resources on *The Merchant* in the classroom attests.

Comprehensive as it may be, however, no carefully contrived structural scaffold will ever dissipate all the vicious elusiveness of *The Merchant* for the last time. Given the fact that a play is always on the move, and no 'truest' form of it exists, and that performance is only one manifestation of the multiple possibilities of a text, *The Merchant* dodged interpreters from its first appearance while typically transferring the burden of interpretation to stage directors. How are we to evaluate the trial scene, and the odd "credit clauses" (Watt, p. 147) that lead to it? Shylock may be a comic character, or a tragic one; he can be a red-bearded Jew, or find his place in the Venetian Christian community. He can elicit anger and scorn or appear as a pitiful victim of the Christian prejudice. More generally, placing a Jew at centre stage has signified a different thing at every turn of history, to the point that

"[t]he stimulus given to the study of Shakespeare […] was intensified in the case of *The Merchant of Venice* as a result of the Holocaust during the Second World War" (Drakakis, p. 30). The chapters devoted here to *The Merchant* in performance and on screen are particularly illuminating, in that they re-contextualize the unsurprisingly prolific afterlife of the play and account for the drastic, at times dramatic transformations of Shylock, the "Venetian usurer". In nineteenth-century Italy, for instance, *Shylock* was deemed a much more eligible title than *Il mercante di Venezia*, and supplanted the latter for a huge time span, a sign of the unbeatable preponderance of the Jew and of the alternating shift of focus on the scene.

This said, a thundering absence is however to be felt in this reader, especially in light of its attention to the performative element, and this absence is the radio. True, our attitude towards the radio has changed over the decades. Formerly, it was welcomed as a new arrival whose great achievements were conjunctive, popular and didactive; then it turned into a wartime leftover, going through a sunset boulevard and a lost battle against TV. Then again, a renaissance of radio drama ensued, pale and inhibited as it may have been. An analysis that thoroughly includes the silent film tradition in fact misses a crucial element of comparison if the radio is obliterated: I'm thinking for instance of Flaminio Bollini's 1960 Radio Rai *Il mercante di Venezia* with Tino Carraro, or Emma Harding's 2018 BBC version of the play set in a 2008 debt-ridden city of London. In Italy, for instance, the treatment of sounds in the first talkies was largely derivative from the radio's long-time expertise in the field. In Portia's words: I remember it well, and I remember it worthy of thy praise…

In spite of this lapse of attention towards the merely audible, however, *The Merchant* emerges throughout this valuable book as an inexhaustible play that will never stop talking to the readers' ears. *The Merchant*, and the vehement flood of responses it elicited, will always accompany those seeking a clue for the rise and spread of anti-Semitism and xenophobia across modern, and early modern, Europe.

Paolo Caponi, University of Milan

Shapiro, James, ***Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future*****, New York, Penguin, 2020, 320 pp.**

James Shapiro's important book was published in early March 2020, just before a dysfunctionally divided America closed down in the onrush of a global pandemic. As I write this, fourteen months later, America remains divided in ways Shapiro does not imagine and could not have predicted.

The book opens and closes with a detailed, critically and politically astute account of the controversial 2017 New York Public Theatre modern-dress production of *Julius Caesar*, which imagined Caesar as a Donald Trump look-alike: sitting in a gold-plated bathtub, casually grabbing a woman's crotch, mock-mimicking a disabled reporter. These were physical additions to the script. The only verbal addition was Casca's description of the blind loyalty of Caesar's supporters, who would have forgiven him "[i]f Caesar had stabbed their mothers *on Fifth Avenue*" (gesturing toward the real Fifth Avenue, not far from the theatre [p. xxiii]). But the equation of Caesar with Trump illuminated, and made real for New York audiences in 2017, Shakespeare's portrayal of a populist authoritarian: his arrogance, his proprietary pronouns, his susceptibility to flattery. I have never been gripped by a performance of *Julius Caesar*, and never had any desire to direct it. But Shapiro's insider account of this production – from the auditorium, in repeated viewings, and from backstage, in his capacity as Shakespeare Scholar in Residence at the Public Theatre – made me wish I, and many more people, could have seen it.

Unfortunately, the production became infamous when a right-wing media storm caricatured it as a liberal fantasy encouraging someone to assassinate President Trump. Shapiro chronicles and analyzes, in the best traditions of journalism, the unfolding of that deliberate misrepresentation of the production. The faux outrage could only have persuaded people unfamiliar with Shakespeare's tragedy. Any reader of this journal knows that Caesar is assassinated half-way through the play, and that the attempt to kill "the spirit […] of Caesar" (p. 106) massively backfires, leading to

the death of all the conspirators and the triumph of authoritarianism. As the director Oskar Eustis told the first night audience, before the performance began, "like drama, democracy depends on the conflict of different points of view", and *Julius Caesar* "warns about what happens when you try to preserve democracy by nondemocratic means" (pp. xxvii-xxviii).

But Shapiro does not emphasize what, in retrospect, is the most striking sentence of Eustis's curtain speech: "the danger of a large crowd of people, manipulated by their emotions, taken over by leaders who urge them to do things that not only are against their interests, but destroy their very institutions that are there to serve and protect them" (p. xxviii). That is exactly what happened on January 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters violently attacked the United States Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of an election won by Trump's opponent.

Shapiro's focus on this one production previews the structure of his book: in each chapter, he tells a compelling story about a particular incident in America's long fascination with Shakespeare, and supports his analysis by digging deep into archives that other scholars have only skimmed. For instance, his chapter on the award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love* is much more thoroughly researched, more illuminating, and more skeptical than the account of that most popular of all Hollywood Shakespeare films found in the 2020 biography, *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, written by the prize-winning Oxford biographer, Hermione Lee.

Shapiro begins with a fascinating juxtaposition of the American President John Quincy Adams and the British actress Fanny Kemble, on tour in America. Though Adams and Kemble have often been quoted by Shakespeareans, Shapiro situates their clashing perspectives on Othello and Desdemona in the larger perspective of conflicting early American attitudes toward race, slavery, and miscegenation. The next chapter begins with the young, girlish Ulysses S. Grant rehearsing the role of Desdemona in an army production of *Othello* planned just before the Mexican-American War and the birth of the Anglo-Saxon myth of America's "manifest destiny" to become a transcontinental imperial nation. Shapiro contrasts these masculine myths with the wildly successful transvestite performances of Romeo by Charlotte Cushman, the

greatest American actress of the nineteenth century, and so far as I am aware America's first gay celebrity.

There follow fascinating chapters on the Astor Place riots and class warfare (1849), the competing interpretations of Shakespeare by President Abraham Lincoln and the actor who assassinated him (1865), the post-war debates about women and marriage encapsulated in *Kiss Me, Kate*, the Broadway musical adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (1948), and the politics of sexuality in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). The only disappointing chapter focuses on the 1916 "community drama" *Caliban by the Yellow Sands* (p. 122), which enlisted seven thousand local performers in New York and Boston to bring to life a mediocre script by an unimportant writer. I understand why, in the years between 2017 and 2020, Shapiro wanted to focus on the issue of immigration. But his account of Henry Cabot Lodge's xenophobic Shakespeare-worship is much more interesting than anything he can find to say about Percy MacKaye's "masque".

Like any Shakespeare scholar who reads this book, I want to quibble with some of Shapiro's omissions and choices. But the book's most important weakness is its concluding confidence that "[t]he future of Shakespeare in America, like the future of the nation itself, would appear secure" (p. 220). The January 6 insurrection (so presciently foreseen by Oskar Eustis in 2017), Trump's 'Big Lie' that the election was fraudulent, and his supporters' continuing rejection of the legitimacy of Trump's defeat threaten the future of the nation more than any crisis since the Confederate insurrection of 1861.

In all the other episodes that Shapiro analyzes, from 1833 to 2017, both sides of an American debate regard Shakespeare as a source of authority and justification. But Trump and his supporters are simply not interested in Shakespeare. Trump does not read books or go to the theatre. Shakespeare is simply part of what Trumpists regard as a despicable, impotent, unjustifiably privileged elite. And on the other side of the political divide, English departments in American colleges and universities are increasingly uncomfortable with Shakespeare's entanglement in the racism and colonialism of the Anglo-Saxon empire. How can Shakespeare continue to be a political asset in an America where

students and their teachers are being urged to "decolonize your bookshelf"? Two years after Shapiro finished writing his excellent book, his confidence in Shakespeare's cultural invulnerability seems distinctly old-fashioned.

Terri Bourus, Florida State University

Webster, John, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Karen Britland, New Mermaids, Methuen Drama, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 216 pp.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*'s famous Echo scene, the protagonist's husband, Antonio, visits a ruined abbey, where (unbeknownst to him) the murdered Duchess lies buried. Moved by the melancholy spectacle of its broken tombs, he begins to moralise upon the transience of earthly splendour: "but all things have their end – / Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men, / Must have like death that we have" (V.iii.17-19). Playing on this motif, the commendatory verses that Webster's fellow dramatists, Thomas Middleton and John Ford, contributed to the first Quarto insist that the play itself constitutes a different kind of "monument" – one that guarantees its author the "lasting fame" that no mere marble can ensure (p. 8). But, to anyone concerned with the fragile state of literary studies today, Antonio's lines must have an uneasy resonance. The institution of English literature as a subject of academic enquiry has a relatively brief history, one originally bound up with Victorian ideology of Empire: here, its adherents insisted, were cultural monuments fit to match those of ancient Greece and Rome and deserving of the same reverential attention. As it happens, Karen Britland's new edition of *Malfi* belongs to a series whose own history parallels that of the discipline whose needs it is meant to address. The original Mermaid editions made readily available, for the first time, collections of plays by some of Shakespeare's most prominent contemporaries: under the editorship of Havelock Ellis, the series was launched in 1887, just as English literature was becoming established as a recognised

discipline at British universities[1]. Regularly reissued by a succession of publishers until the early 1960s, Ellis's texts were then replaced by the single play New Mermaids which, under various imprints and through a succession of editions, have remained a staple of undergraduate drama courses until the present day.

The Duchess of Malfi, in a pioneering edition by Elizabeth M. Brennan, was amongst the first to appear in the new series (1964): republished in 1983, and in a "fully revised" third edition a decade later, it was replaced by Brian Gibbons' excellent fourth edition in 2001, itself revised in 2014. The increasing pace of re-publication no doubt reflects a gathering anxiety on the part of the current publisher (Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury) about the undergraduate market at which the New Mermaids have been directed. In a neoliberal environment that nourishes an increasing instrumental notion of education, enrolments in English (and in the humanities more generally) have been falling at universities across the world; many departments have been 'downsized' (resulting in shrunken curricula) and some have been threatened with complete closure. In an attempt to prop up the subject, both schools and universities have felt themselves pushed towards a crude notion of 'relevance' that has not only reduced the teaching of pre-twentieth-century literature, but is encouraging a presentist tendency in the treatment of those works that continue to be taught.

This tendency is evident in the determinedly contemporary accent of Britland's updated *Malfi*. It is telling that of the twenty-seven items in its annotated list of "Further Reading", twenty-one belong to the present century, and none were published before 1985. Britland's account of the play's stage history is similarly biased towards the twenty-first century, much of it devoted to 'adaptations' and 'reworkings' at the expense of more faithful versions, such as those at the Almeida Theatre (2019-20), at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre (2018), and at the

[1] The subject was first included in the curriculum at King's College, London, in 1840, and first included in examinations nineteen years later. By 1871 it was linked to the teaching of Classics at the University of Otago in distant New Zealand. At Oxford, the School of English was founded in 1894; and in 1910 the establishment of the King Edward Professorship marked its growing importance at the University of Cambridge.

London Globe's Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (2014) – all of which are ignored, even though the latter, performed in seventeenth-century costume in a replica of a Jacobean theatre, is perhaps the only production of the play readily available in an on-screen performance.

This tilt towards the contemporary is, if anything, even more pronounced in the editor's critical account of the play. Britland is especially sympathetic to current feminist readings inspired by the #MeToo movement, which present it as an exposé of "toxic masculinity" (p. xix), and "the corrupting effect of unchecked male power" (p. xx). It is true that, as its title reminds us, *The Duchess of Malfi* belongs to a group of early seventeenth-century tragedies whose action is centred upon a female protagonist, a development that not only reflected the increasing importance of the female audience in early modern theatres, but responded to a larger debate about the legitimacy of female power – the supposedly 'unnatural' phenomenon that John Knox (contemplating the reigns of Mary Queen of Scots and her cousin Elizabeth I) infamously dubbed "the Monstruous Regiment of Women". But while that debate may seem to anticipate aspects of modern feminism, this does not make *Malfi* in itself a feminist play. Indeed, as Webster's own dedicatory epistle and the witty encomia of his fellow playwrights make clear, his tragedy is more concerned with the tyranny of power and the corruptions of 'worldly greatness' than in issues of gender per se: while the Duchess is the play's nominal protagonist, she does in fact share that pre-eminence with Bosola, who is not only given the same number of lines, but assumes the central role after her death at the end of Act IV; and this structural balance reflects the way in which the Duchess and her murderer are shown to be victims of the same perverted social hierarchy.

Even more problematic than Britland's effort to fit the play to twenty-first-century feminist beliefs is her determination to align it with the current vogue for "ecocriticism and the environmental humanities" (p. xxiii). *Malfi*, she declares, is "a play that insists on human actors' […] embeddedness in the natural world" (p. xxiii), "asking what, if anything, differentiates humankind from beasts" (p. viii), its "[a]nimalistic similes" not only "underlining […] the ways in which corrupt humans become like beasts, but also

drawing attention to the porous nature of human identity and to the networks of dependency that create intricate ecologies of connection" (p. xxv). For her, the tyrannical Aragonian brothers are to be seen presiding over "an ecosystem of parasites" (p. xxv). At the centre of such arguments, of course, lie those figures of wolfish behaviour that are brought to grotesque life in Duke Ferdinand's "lycanthropia", when he is spotted with a dead man's leg upon his shoulder, howling to the world that he is a wolf (V.ii). But the horror of this description has nothing to do with human "embeddedness" in nature: to the contrary, it represents the most shocking violation of the natural order that it is possible to imagine, belonging as it does to a culture that imagined humankind as utterly separate from the animal domain. Moreover – in a play obsessed with monuments of greatness, and whose closing speech once again reflects on the ephemerality of earthly fame – it is surely important that the Duke's madness has drawn him to a churchyard where, like other similarly afflicted madmen, he pillages the burial places of the dead.

Britland is not, of course, entirely indifferent to the play's historical contexts; her useful account of Webster's sources allows her to touch on readings that have explored the ways in which the action reflects Webster's social, political, and religious preoccupations. She offers a brief discussion of ways in which the play may reflect the doctrines of the religious reformer John Calvin; and, in the course of this, she mentions Webster's recent elegy for the deceased Protestant hero, Prince Henry. She fails, however, to notice the playwright's return to elegiac celebration of the Prince ten years later in *Monuments of Honour* – just as she ignores the way in which the Echo scene itself seems to have been inspired by a passage in George Wither's *Prince Henry's Obsequies* (1612). Yet such details are crucial to an understanding not only of the play's religious politics, but of the idea of true greatness celebrated in the play's concluding couplet: "Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end" (V.v).

By all of this, I do not mean to say that Britland's *Duchess of Malfi* is a bad edition: it is perhaps too easy to complain of what is missing from the introduction, given that this is at least one third shorter than its immediate predecessor – something that no doubt

answers to the growing conviction that students no longer respond well to lengthy introductions. After all, Britland partly compensates for this by supplying explanatory footnotes that are fuller and often more illuminating than those in any previous Mermaid. Furthermore, she is meticulous in her efforts to preserve what she calls "the play's blank verse", resisting what she sees as frequently mistaken efforts to "chang[e] Webster's idiosyncratic and unmetrical lines to prose" (p. xxxiv). A "Lineation Appendix" carefully details her alterations to the verse layout of the first Quarto. Even here, though, there is room for doubt, since that reference to "the play's blank verse" begs an important question about what exactly constitutes "the play" – especially since Webster (at least in III.iv) was at pains to distance himself from the printed version in a marginal note that announced: "The author disclaims this ditty to be his". We have no way of knowing exactly how the poet's own manuscript differentiated verse from prose; and Britland's line-divisions typically overlook Webster's apparent fondness for 'amphibious lines' (those that simultaneously complete one pentameter and begin another), as well as an habitual attachment to iambic rhythms that can make it hard to determine whether some passages were meant as prose, or simply as irregular verse.

In the end, it is difficult to believe that the General Editors' decision to replace Brian Gibbons' excellent 2001 edition with this new *Duchess* will justify the substantial efforts or the cost involved. For the shrinking numbers of students still gripped by a passion for literature, the excitement and wonder of a play like *The Duchess of Malfi* must lie not in any seeming anticipation of their own concerns, but in its capacity to open their minds to a world that, while recognisably ancestral to their own, is nevertheless disconcertingly unfamiliar. The past, as L. P. Hartley taught us long ago, is a foreign country: that is why we want to go there.

Michael Neill, University of Auckland