Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Don Paterson
Faber and Faber £17.99
ISBN 9780571245024

The following review has kindly been provided by Dr. Paul Edmondson, Director of Education for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. It was originally published on bloggingshakespeare.com, entitled “Extinguishing Shakespeare’s Sonnets”. You can find the piece in its original form at www.boggingshakespeare.com/extinguishing-shakespeares-sonnets

“Thursday 4 November sees the publication of Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets: A New Commentary by multi-prize-winning Scottish poet Don Paterson. It is handsomely presented by Faber and Faber and will attract a great deal of attention.

As I settled down to read it I became more and more frustrated by its tone of voice, the assumptions Paterson is making about the Sonnets, and the kinds of comments he is inviting us to engage with. Without doubt, this is one of the most self-indulgent studies of the Sonnets I’ve ever seen (and they have certainly inspired many shelves of misguided criticism over the centuries).

Paterson is a poet first and foremost. It would have been far better for him to write a series of poems in response to Shakespeare’s Sonnets.

His starting point is unfortunate, as he seems to thinks most of them are overrated. Paterson extinguishes (or at least deflates) many of the poems: ‘This isn’t a great poem’ (Sonnet 2); ‘Another dull one’ (Sonnet 10); ‘Not much to see here, folks’ (Sonnet 41); ‘I’d cheerfully send this one into the unanthologised dark’ (Sonnet 68); ‘Oh enough already’ (Sonnet 72); ‘Let it go, man’ (Sonnet 80); ‘This is pretty dull stuff’ (Sonnet 98), ‘Pretty average effort, really’ (Sonnet 111), ‘a cheap trick’ (Sonnet 130); and ‘very little interest for the contemporary reader’ (Sonnet 144). He dismisses Sonnets 27 and 29 (which have meant a lot to readers over the centuries) as ‘two duffers’ (p. 86) and suggests that Sonnet 30 (which he calls ‘facile’) would be better without its final couplet. This is the sonnet which ends: ‘But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,/All losses are restored, and sorrows end.’ But the whole point of this couplet is to turn us away from the poet’s morose self-reflections, and to admit a ‘thee’, a ‘dear friend’ who rescues the poet from isolation.

There are too many facetious asides: ‘the poem is nothing to shout about’ (Sonnet 17), ‘this conceit looks like a ten-car pile-up’ (Sonnet 52) and, worse, ‘given how dodgy it was, running it on to the menu from my local Chinese takeaway is going to improve it’ (Sonnet 98 when followed by Sonnet 99). Why produce a five-hundred page commentary on Shakespeare’s Sonnets if you don’t actually like most of them? Or perhaps Paterson thinks he is presenting something more like John Ruskin’s love-hate account of Venice, confining our appreciation to his taste?

Part of Paterson’s problem is his fatal assumption that the Sonnets are autobiographical and are printed in a discernible, narrative sequence. He (mis)reads them as true expressions of love, rather than as highly artificially shaped poems about love. This leads him to paraphrase nearly all of them which, as a poet himself, he knows is surely the kiss of death to any poem.

In its more positive moments, Paterson’s account is not without occasional flashes of insight. Of Sonnet 129 (‘Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame’), for example, he comments ‘in the syntax of its disgusted litany, it sounds to me like George Herbert’s “Prayer”, only read backwards in a mirror.’ Occasionally, he demonstrates his specialist interest in poetry but sometimes through jargon. I suspect I won’t be alone in finding some of this unintelligible.

His commentary is larded with slang and asides to popular culture. This could be finely employed, but he lets it run away with him. At worst this takes us into some sweeping generalizations. At one point during his commentary on Sonnet 35 he divides up male sexuality into heterosexual and homosexual and generalises about how people of different sexualities understand the relationship between love and sex (p. 107). Elsewhere, in the context of sexual frustration and Sonnet 129, he says that ‘many priests [in the Roman

2010 – A Year in Reviews. I cannot recall a more exciting year for Shakespearean literary events and publications. When I think about 2010’s great publications, I am drawn to Arden’s controversial release of Double Falsehood, James Shapiro’s best-selling Contested Will, John Pitcher’s long-awaited edition of The Winter’s Tale, and Stanley Wells’ Shakespeare, Sex, and Love. This is not even mentioning the number of RSC editions of the plays, Barbara Hodgdon’s Arden 3 edition of The Taming of the Shrew (which is now the editorial benchmark by a long measure), and Julian Curty’s Shakespeare on Stage (for which Will has provided a review in this edition). But now I’ve gone and mentioned them! Readers, there’s so much to look forward to in 2011 – the Oxford Shakespeare’s final play (Richard II) and John Jowett’s Sir Thomas More (for Arden) being just the tip of the scholarly iceberg. Happy Holidays from all of us at the bookshop! See you in the new year! Best Wishes, Matt Kubus (Bookshop Assistant) and Will Sharpe (Editor)
In the past five years, having had great success with the more generalised volumes dedicated to single dramatists, the ‘Companion’ series has moved in the direction of specificity, focusing on a particular topic in the field of English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare’s last plays, Shakespeare’s poetry, Shakespearean comedy and tragedy, Shakespeare’s history plays, Shakespeare on stage, on film, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The latest addition to the series on English Renaissance tragedy (complete with a detailed chronology of the development of the genre) professes to develop the renewed interest in staging non-Shakespearean tragedy in a scholarly way.

The volume is divided into two parts, the first of which contextualizes the recurring themes within the plays of the genre. Each of the essays in this section is mindful of the classical inheritance of the dramatists, as well as their ability to adapt and revolutionize the way in which these stories were re-written, staged, and received. Andrew Hadfield’s essay, ‘Tragedy and the Nation State,’ was of particular interest insofar as it accounted for the socio-political interests of the dramatists as well as those who may have viewed the original performances of the plays. Many of the essays refer to Norton and Sackville’s 1558 tragedy, Gorboduc, which is often considered to be the first dramatic tragedy in English. Much of the volume’s strength can be attributed to the General Editors, Emma Smith and Garrett A Sullivan, who compiled a seamless anthology whose essays speak to one another. The example of Gorboduc is testimony to that.

Part two performs various readings of selected plays that one will often find in an anthology of Renaissance drama: The Spanish Tragedy, Edward II, The Changeling, and ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore being just a few. The book is a refreshing compilation of the latest scholarship that will be a much-needed accompaniment to students of Renaissance drama. (Matt Kubus)
working in theatre provides. She also reveals the simple pre-performance ritual she has practised for many years. Favourite roles are discussed (Titania), as are those she missed out on (Grizabella in Cats) and those she struggled to make sense of (Regan in King Lear).

Some of the anecdotes and photographs may well be familiar to readers of her previous book but, as the title suggests, there is still much here to enjoy that is new in this second volume. It’s clear that this collection is not to be her final word, so perhaps we can look forward to sitting down with her and those photograph albums again in the future.

(Emma Mulveagh)

**Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time**

John H. Astington

Cambridge University Press £15.99
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The first three words of the title of John H. Astington’s book, Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time, tell you exactly what you’re getting. With only passing mentions of companies and playhouses, this book is about the men themselves (and remember, it was only men back then) engaged in the work of being actors.

Personal involvement in the ‘art of stage-playing’ is examined at an educational, apprenticeship, and professional level. Acting in plays at grammar school was justified as a means of improving oratorical skills in Latin, although they often went far beyond that remit to the extent that in the choral training schools, these performances could compete with those of the professional companies. The means and methods for apprenticeship by training and employment in the theatre are described in detail as, unlike other professions such as grocers or goldsmiths, there was no established Guild to regulate the apprenticeship system in the acting world. Meanwhile, in any acting company a variety of plays of all genres were being performed by the same small group of actors, and consideration is given to whether assignment of roles relied on the actors’ versatility, or were to a certain extent type-cast, and if so, how much of the actor’s own personality was allowed to appear in the performance.

In support of these discussions, facts and figures come thick and fast, so much so that at times the reader can be somewhat in sympathy with the line quoted in Chapter 4 from *The Duchess of Malfi*: ‘like such who study to know how many knots was in Hercules’ club’ (3.3.41-3)! However, a comprehensive appendix of principal actors and an extensive index helps keep track of who did what, and where, so the details can be kept in order and serve towards building up the bigger picture of performance in that period.

One such detail is the almost obsessive noting of the age of an actor when taking on certain roles which, added to other facts, leads to interesting conclusions about the age, range, and physical qualities of apprentices; the performance of female roles; the development of adults within the company; and the on-stage relationship of an apprentice to his master. All these, then, inform the analysis of two plays performed by the Kings’ Men for which the original cast lists still exist.

Finally, a word of warning about the last three words of the title. Unlike the first three, these are more loosely applied, as the book actually covers a time span of roughly 100 years, 1558-1660, and in fact much of the data is drawn from performances in the 1620’s-30’s, years after Shakespeare’s death. Presumably the terms ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Elizabethan/Stuart’ don’t have the same marketing appeal as ‘Shakespeare’. However, since Shakespeare was himself only part of the creative process in a thriving theatre culture, it is good to read a book that does not quote compulsively from or refer exclusively to Shakespeare, yet studying his theatrical working environment still adds to our understanding of his part in the process.

(Roxanne Bennis)

**Shakespeare on Stage**

Julian Curry

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As I’ve commented in these pages before, the robust strand of Shakespearean performance criticism that believes in the pathway to the eternal verities of Shakespeare’s characters lying within their unwitting ciphers – the actors who have personated them – is a rose by another name that smells as sweet. I am, of course, referring to what is an apparent reinvigoration of New Criticism, the early twentieth century scholarly pursuit – undertaken in the study rather than on the stage – which sought to describe Shakespeare’s characters as though they were real people. Clearly Freud and his followers had a big hand in this, as the quest for the psyche drove attempts to strip away the veneer of a part to find its deepest motivations. From roughly the 1960s to the end of the century, however (and these are all huge generalisations for the expediency of space), criticism was taken off the psychiatrist’s couch and thrust into various political arenas. Why stay within a literary work when it can be sent out into the world to contest gender equalities, social disenfranchisement, racism, hegemonies of language, colonial oppression … well, the point is that authors in search of a character became a serious scholarly faux pas.

Fast forward ten years and studies of this kind have re-entered through the back door to be presented as a new guest, when in fact they represent the one who had been thrown out, now back with a change of clothes and a false beard. Of course, in the real world, impervious – as it always is – to the assaults of the academy, interest in what actors thought about the roles they play never went away. The trouble is that often the great actors’ private insights into a part, shall we say, failed to match the potency of their stage
interpretations. Witness this from Olivier speaking to Ken Tynan in a New York Times interview about his reluctance to play Othello:

He [Anthony Quayle] said, ‘The most difficult are the ones that are complaining all the time, the ones that moan. Macbeth is all right because he’s positive,’ he said, ‘but you know what you hate about Titus, he’s always going ‘Oh,’ ‘Aw,’ ‘Aw, look,’ ‘Oh, fancy them doing that to me,’ ‘Oh,’ ‘Oh,’ ‘Oh,’–and how many ways are there of saying ‘oh, oh, oh? It’s very tough on your imagination, on your resourcefulness, and it’s also a very great strain physically.’ He said Othello was all of that and you have to black up as well.

It is hard to know whether this kind of dictation is merely defensive, or a calculated disingenuousness disguised as an inability to speak profoundly about one’s art in order to throw reporters off the scent, and, ultimately, not have to do any more bloody interviews. Of course, there are many actors and directors who speak with wonderful insight and precision about what they do, and I suppose it’s fair to say that both sides are represented in this volume. Curry tells us in his Introduction that the late Paul Scofield, one of the last century’s great actors, ‘sent a charmingly self-deprecatory postcard asking to be excused, claiming not to be much good at interviews’. Hmmm. Still, others that did say yes are very good at interviews: Brian Cox on Titus; Rebecca Hall on Rosalind; and Adrian Lester on Henry V are very thoughtful and articulate subjects, and there are some real superstar names that will no doubt generate as much interest in themselves as in what they can reveal to us about Shakespeare’s characters. Kevin Spacey speaks with candour about his Richard II, Ian McKellen remembers his Macbeth (though perhaps that verb needs to hedged in with scare quotes):

JC: You had a talisman from the witches that you re-examined in the light of the bulb.
IM: Did I?

This is not a further insinuation that mistrustful actors are reluctant to talk about their work to parasitic scholars (Curry is in fact an actor himself), but an understandable difficulty in remembering a thirty-four-year-old performance. It is a neat reminder that theatre is the most ephemeral medium there is, and capturing anything about an otherwise lost production for posterity from its major protagonists is one of the stated aims of Curry’s Introduction: ‘What would I not give for Edmund Kean’s account of his King Lear!’ He admits that, at the very least, trying to get them to recall anything about their productions, including, hopefully, ‘how they acted’ or ‘what they did’ may be the best we can hope for. It is like a desire – as Stephen Greenblatt had it – to speak with the dead, only in this case while the dead are still alive. Inevitably, problems of memory dog other interviewees: Judi Dench on Juliet (even the most cursory bit of mental arithmetic will tell you that that one must have been quite a long time ago) for example. Still, most are within the compass of living memory: Jude Law’s Hamlet being the most recent. This is not the first volume to walk the line between a scholarly attempt at illuminating the plays and an indulgence of our fetish for rehearsal diaries of famous actors. Yet it is slightly different in that it is a series of interviews with actors – and there’s quite a roll-call here – rather than a series of essays by actors in volumes such as the Players of Shakespeare series, or Cambridge’s Performing Shakespeare’s Tragedies Today. It is a noble enterprise in theory, but of course it still ends up being merely a series of interviews that are more illuminating about the people being interviewed than the mysteries of a set of roles that have borne 400 years’ worth of energetic reinterpretation and show no signs of slowing down any time soon. Still, why not? This is a highly entertaining volume, rich in idiosyncrasy, personal reflection (which is usually considered and fruitful), and, often, chinks of light shed on these the most enduring and mysterious of artworks.

(Will Sharpe)

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