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reads
Great Shakespeareans
(4 vols, Continuum, 2010)
edited by Claude Rawson, Peter Holland, Roger Paulin and Adrian Poole

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HERE IS A QUESTION FOR READERS OF THE *COLERIDGE BULLETIN*: who would you include in a list of the great Shakespeareans of the long eighteenth century? David Garrick, the actor-manager who gave the cult of Shakespeare unstoppable momentum, may be your first choice. Samuel Johnson's efforts as an editor and a literary expert will spring to mind — and those of Edmond Malone ought to, but might not. After the selection of these dignitaries, it perhaps becomes a matter of preference; and you can argue amongst yourselves. However, pity the general editors of this series, Peter Holland and Adrian Poole, in choosing 'those figures who have had the greatest influence on the interpretation, understanding and reception of Shakespeare, both nationally and internationally' (I. i). Each of the four volumes begins with a preface where they take up a defensive posture, aware that their readers might be spoiling for a fight. 'This is not a project designed to establish a new canon, nor are our volumes intended to be encyclopedic in scope', they claim (i). In the event, volume I includes John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Johnson, and Malone as the founding fathers of critical and editorial work; while the stage is represented in volume II by Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and Edmund Kean. Volume III considers the dissemination of Shakespeare on the Continent by Voltaire, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and August Wilhelm Schlegel — with Coleridge joining this pantheon as a critic heavily influenced by Schlegel. And finally, volume IV takes Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and John Keats as writers 'of the Romantic age' whose 'connections are close and the sense of live dialogue strong' (IV. 1-2).

Now the arguments can begin. If Kean is worthy of inclusion, why not his celebrated predecessor — the fiercely independent and rebellious Charles Macklin — whose performances of Shylock and Macbeth likewise broke with tradition? And the infamous William Henry Ireland seems an obvious omission when his nemesis, the literary detective Malone, is given a place. After all, Ireland's forgeries — while whipping up one of the great literary controversies and even fooling the erudite James Boswell — helped to define what was Shakespearean as much as anything else in this period. With Ireland haunting the background of a number of these chapters, you sense that the collection's title has led to the exclusion of those figures who might be considered as lacking canonical legitimacy. This is most apparent in volume III where all of the figures are actors mainly associated with one theatre — Drury Lane — one of the two patent London theatres. And as shown by Jane Moody in *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (2000) and Richard Schoch's *Not*

Shakespeare (2002), there was a vibrant theatre scene that gave Londoners a taste of Shakespeare away from this seat of royal patronage. Perhaps the so-called minor theatres had a cumulative effect upon the reception of Shakespeare in the early nineteenth century as significant as the influence of Drury Lane.

Indeed, the whole concept of a 'Great Shakespearean' is rather thorny. It is possible to be more one than the other, as recognized by Simon Jarvis in his essay on Pope. While Pope's critical edition of 1723-25 exists as a significant staging post in the publication of Shakespeare, Jarvis does concede that Pope presents 'a beautifully printed surface' with swathes of text where there is little editorial intervention. In contrast, Jarvis suggests that Lewis Theobald 'is the early eighteenth-century figure from whom a properly historical Shakespearean philology takes its most powerful impetus' (I. 80). Similarly, Michèle Willems' fascinating essay on Voltaire acknowledges that 'defining him as a "Great Shakespearean" may appear as a paradox, if not as a provocation' (III. 5). He famously described Shakespearean drama as 'pearls in a dunghill'. As well as looking at Voltaire's selection and translation of Shakespeare's 'vulgar speeches, indecent language and bawdy passages' (31), Willems also considers why he has such prominence as a Shakespearean scholar when his contributions perhaps fail to merit such a distinction; contributions which are eclipsed by François-Victor Hugo's 'translations of the Complete Works which serve to this day' (39). In another irony, Voltaire encouraged the cult of Shakespeare in England and Germany as others rose to the bard's defence against 'the carping French critic' (39). Much like Ireland decades later, Voltaire became a straw-man to be knocked down in the veneration of Shakespeare.

As for the champions of those chosen, some of these writers strain under the weight of expectation, as if duty-bound to justify their subject. In doing so, Michael Dobson overplays the idea of Kemble as the forgotten man of London theatre whose inclusion may surprise (II. 55, 58), but it is pleasing nonetheless to see this actor acknowledged. Along with Peter Thomson's essay on Kean, volume II instructively contrasts these two Shakespearean actors: the 'high Tory royalist' whose 'statuesque, idealized performances' of patrician figures is pitted against the rebellious 'underdog straining against the power of privilege' (141) who sought 'to exploit the emotional range' of a role (150) through bursts of passion. As a contrast to the firebrand Kean, Kemble's Hamlet was 'like a man in armour, with a determined inveteracy of purpose, in one undeviating straight line' (IV. 90), as Hazlitt described him in droll fashion. Kean's acting provided a theatrical revolution after patent audiences had become conditioned by Kemble's performances. Although Thomson presents Kean as a one-man social and theatrical revolution (II. 144) — the actor for 'the Age of Reform' (148) — the earlier popularity of Garrick may also be an informative context in which to understand Kean's acting style. The description of Kean's style seems reminiscent of the bursts of activity, leading to theatrical clap-traps, developed by Garrick.

Despite this caveat, the sense of dialogue between essays and volumes is a

strength of this collection. While the theatrical criticism of Hazlitt, Coleridge and Lamb is employed to recreate the art of contemporary actors, Reginald Foakes considers how Coleridge's approach to Shakespeare was partly reactionary — a rejection of what the stage had become. In providing a rich context for Foakes' essay, Dobson presents Kemble's development of 'opulent and visually coherent productions of Shakespearean tragedy' (56). For Dobson, Kemble 'anticipated what has more recently been called "designer Shakespeare", focusing and expressing his interpretation of the plays via meticulously organized décor and movement and immense stage tableaux' (62). In emphasizing Kemble's impact as an actor-manager, and perhaps led by the collection's title, Dobson loses sight of the collaborative nature of theatre as illustrated by the artistic efforts of William Capon who toiled to satisfy Kemble's desire for scenic authenticity. Harvard's theatre collection, for example, holds Capon's scenery records where, amongst other feats, he describes viewing Westminster Hall from a lofty height — climbing to within ten feet of the apex of the roof — to take measurements for the staging of *The Plain Dealer*.[1]

During such 'ever more ambitious attempts to achieve pictorial realism' (III. 135), Foakes claims that Coleridge retreated from the theatre to the closet in his appreciation of Shakespeare. For Foakes, Coleridge's focus upon textual detail and minutiae within lectures is indicative of a reaction against the transformation of staging that created 'a theatre of the eye' (133) at the two cavernous patent houses. Coleridge's preference was 'for Shakespeare in the "closet"' (137) with 'the basic premise of his criticism [being] that Shakespeare was above all a great poet, and his plays invited attention primarily to their language' (145). However, it is assumed that Coleridge was protesting against what London theatre had become, without any evidence except an insistence upon his focus on the language of plays when this seems an obvious consideration for a lecturer with the text of Shakespeare before him. And as Foakes acknowledges, Coleridge was not averse to writing for Drury Lane if it promised remuneration (130).

Foakes' chapter considers Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare at the Royal Institution (1808), the London Philosophical Society (1811-12) and the Surrey Institution (1812) while repeatedly acknowledging that the textual evidence is fragmentary. While using such evidence as Coleridge's lecture notes — with some content reappearing in *Biographia Literaria* and *Table-Talk* — along with newspaper reports and the notes of audience members, Foakes gives the impression that Coleridge's delivery was often spontaneous and improvisatory to the point of being perverse. After a lecture advertised as being on *Romeo and Juliet*, Henry Crabb Robinson reported that Coleridge could talk "'very amusingly without speaking at all on the subject'" (161). Considering these factors, Foakes' rather grand claim that 'Coleridge changed the course of criticism' (143) may overstate his contribution. While it is difficult to gauge the impact of one man's ideas upon the reception and understanding of Shakespeare, Foakes nonetheless offers some arresting claims concerning

Coleridge's legacy. He places Coleridge at the beginning of one critical tradition, that concerned with the psychological interpretation of character. With Hamlet, Lady Macbeth and others, 'Coleridge sees them from the inside' (151) claims Foakes. As one example, the literary cliché of Hamlet's fatal flaw — that 'fatal weakness in his inability to act' (150) — is presented as Coleridge's invention. In addition, Coleridge is given the distinction of having created a chronological order for the plays using internal textual evidence which is 'closer' than Malone's 'to the order now generally accepted' (165).

But has Foakes succeeded in elevating Coleridge above the hubbub of competing claims and cemented his reputation as a great Shakespearean? Reading Foakes' chapter, it is easy to appreciate that Coleridge was a cultural magpie who would appropriate other writers on Shakespeare if it served his thesis. And yet, the argument that Coleridge's psychological approach was so innovative that he had to create a new critical vocabulary is persuasive. Rather aptly for this review, he is credited with coining the word 'subjectivity' (168).

[1] THE F MS Thr 327