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Review Article

Shakespeareana Eclectica

Shakespeare's Festive World. By François Laroque. Cambridge UP, 1991. Pp. 423. £45.

"*Coriolanus*" at the National. By Kristina Bedford. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1992. Pp. 351. £39.95.

Casting Shakespeare's Plays: London Actors and Their Roles, 1590-1642. By T. J. King. Cambridge UP, 1992. Pp. 284. £35.00.

The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642. Third Edition. By Andrew Gurr. Cambridge UP, 1992. Pp. 280. £12.95.

Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History. By Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan. Cambridge UP, 1991. Pp. 290. £35.

The latest clutch of Shakespeareana is commendably eclectic, each book testifying to his endless diversity. François Laroque's *Shakespeare's Festive World* is a distinguished French addition to our understanding of Shakespeare. Basically, he has adopted the "Festive" component in C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* and taken it a great deal further than Barber did. Laroque maps for us the entire scene of Elizabethan festivity. It is a calendary matter, and here is a complete dossier of the dates, festivals, fairs, feasts, folk customs, religious and secular holidays. Laroque shows how the calendary year falls into two halves: the sacred

or ritualistic half, running from Christmas Day; and the profane or secular half, beginning with June 24 (Midsummer Day, the Feast of St. John the Baptist). Laroque is fully alert to the correspondences between the Greek, Roman, Celtic and Christian festivals, as to the folk customs associated with the English. What he has done is to reconstruct the annual world as the Elizabethans experienced it; it is a splendid and scholarly evocation of the Elizabethan response to time.

Laroque also provides some critical coverage of the festive world as it is assimilated into dramatic form. He devotes a chapter to "Festivity and Images in Shakespeare's plays," and is especially good on the implications of banquets and feasts. These images can modify our sense of certain characters. Shylock is viewed as a "kind of amalgamation of the typical Jewish moneylender and the Puritan" (256). He sees the England of 1600-1640 as one in which the festive system was declining, and this is reflected in Shakespeare's Jacobean plays. *Othello* gets a chapter to itself, as a play loud with festive echoes, "a play characterized by a tug-of-war between the forces of comedy and those of tragedy." The critic will need to ponder Laroque's assessment of the festive component in Shakespeare. Above all though, this book is a dense and satisfying survey of the temporal world that Shakespeare experienced and transformed.

Can nothing be done to stop the Book of the Rehearsal? I used to think this genre a thoroughly good thing. So it is, as composed by actors. William Redfield's *Letters From An Actor* is a superb record of the Burton/Gielgud *Hamlet*. Maurice Good's *Every Inch a Lear* (the Ustinov/Phillips *King Lear* at Stratford, Ontario) is a Canadian classic. One needs the active, sophisticated insider. Even David Selbourne's acid journal of the Brook *Dream* is most valuable, as the serial reaction of a disaffected, highly intelligent observer. But now the genre has been taken over by groupies, who attach themselves to a "major" production (characteristically, at the National Theatre) thus pre-empting the process of judgment. I thought the recent record of Peter Hall's *Antony and Cleopatra* at the National dull enough, but this is worse. Kristina Bedford's "*Coriolanus*" at the National is a numbingly laborious work of hagiography, which implicitly and explicitly raises the McKellen/Hall *Coriolanus* (1984/85) to a level much above its merits.

"Had it been of the Virgin Mary, it had been something," observed Jonson of Donne's "Progress of the Soul." Had this account of McKellen's *Coriolanus* been the rehearsal diary of Burbage's Hamlet, one would have thought it excessive. But 350 pages! Of which, 144 are mere notes of the rehearsals. "Aufidius' barking of 'Assist' was good. . . ." "Loss of momentum at the opening of the market-place scene." I defy the keenest theatregoer or historian to read through these pages without double-glazed eyeballs. What one misses is selectivity: everything has gone in, *everything*. And allied to this is a lack of judgment.

This *Coriolanus* was notable for a showy—one might say, show-off—performance by Ian McKellen. I recall Frederick Treves's Menenius as fully up to National Theatre standards, and so was Greg Hicks's Aufidius. The rest of the cast was fairly ordinary. And the production missed fire with a disastrous decision to bring in some 80 members of the ordinary public to play the crowd. Starving proles do not carry Gucci handbags, a thought which the director had insufficiently pondered. It is not possible to make extravagant claims for this *Coriolanus*, which was far inferior to the Olivier *Coriolanus*, also directed by Hall, in 1959. Yet this is the one we have the book of. The entire process is a kind of investment decision, taken early by the writer in conjunction with a leading director and institution, which cannot be revoked and is not subject to review. Or indeed, reviews. The reaction of the first-night critics is not cited. They have no role. This book begins and ends with the solipsism of the rehearsal process.

T. J. King's *Casting Shakespeare's Plays* is for professionals only. It is a meticulous, austere examination of the casting procedures for Shakespeare's own acting company, together with those which can be derived from the records of other contemporary playhouses. Mr. King argues that Shakespeare's casts of characters were determined by common theatrical practices at London playhouses between 1590 and 1642. The average requirement remained fairly stable throughout the period: "ten men in principal male roles—defined empirically as those who speak twenty-five or more lines—and four boys in principal female roles—those who speak ten or more lines" (1). There are 81 tables (casting analyses of plays) and 27 illustrations (photostats of title pages, and cast lists) to support this thesis. Mr. King is necessarily led to consider the practice of doubling, and lays down some guidelines.

The main thrust of these highly technical analyses is to check the more imaginative speculations of recent scholars, prone to award parts on the basis of a preconceived aptness for the role. The key statement comes early: ". . . the most important consideration in casting a role was not the type of role to be acted, but the *length* of the role" (18). I believe this to be a well-founded caution. English actors were (dare one say, are) technicians and craftsmen before anything else. They think about quantities, about lines to be learned, time required for costume changes, tea-breaks to be spaced, and the weight of what must be carried. (The classic advice to an English actor is not Hamlet's, but Gielgud's, to Hordern, on the playing of Lear: "Get a small Cordelia.") Shakespeare's colleagues were *players* before they were *actors*.

Again, doubling was not as free as scholarly fancy would like. Mr. King has no time for the archetypal speculation, that Cordelia and the Fool were doubled: ". . . there is no example of an adult actor playing a principal female role, nor is there an example of a boy playing a principal adult role . . . such doubling would be contrary to usual casting procedures for Shakespeare's company" (270). "Usual casting procedures," one can add, so often become hardened into "tradition," which is virtually legislative in force. Doubtless a company could not be run on any lines other than "traditional." I cannot see Armin yielding up his Fool entitlement, nor can I see him deigning to expropriate a boy's part. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the doubling speculation was demonstrated in Washington, D.C. a few years ago, when an unfortunate actor was doomed to play Falstaff and King Henry IV. Equity ought to have stepped in. Clearly, the Elizabethan stage anticipated by many years a rational Equity ruling on casting; and Mr. King's book consolidates our sense of the rules to which Shakespeare worked.

Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearean Stage* is already the standard overview: the Third Edition now ensures that any possible competition will be beaten off for years to come. Mr. Gurr has carried out a thorough revision that includes the recent discoveries of the sites of the Rose and Globe theatres. All previous discussions of stage design have to be accommodated with the archaeological facts, lately revealed. For example, we learn that the auditorium of the Rose appears to have been raked, information which strongly affects the question of sightlines and acting techniques. Mr. Gurr brings a fresh eye to the issues; he offers the

absorbing suggestion that what we see as the "trestle" supporting the stage in the De Witt sketch is a gap in the hangings draped around the stage (136). *The Shakespearean Stage* is a most accomplished, deft, and well-organized charting of a vast territory. It remains an indispensable companion.

Caliban, a salvage and deformed slave. That is the Folio's dramatis personae. Those six words are at the heart of a cultural tempest still raging, and *Shakespeare's Caliban* takes the story almost to the present day. Who is Caliban, how is he to be portrayed on stage? Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan take us through the historic phases of the Rorschach that is Caliban. "Savage" looks a likely starting-point, but "'savage' tells us much about Caliban's cultural condition . . . but nothing about his physical appearance or moral attitudes" (9). "Slave" is more promising, cutting us in to the history of slave trading and to the African in America. It was the abolitionist movement that conditioned Macready's production of *The Tempest* (1838), with a Caliban that was "the focus of pity and human understanding" (105). But Leslie Fiedler and Leo Marx have seen in Caliban an American Indian, who illustrates themes of colonialism and race. This dual ethnicity, African/Indian, has enabled directors to play insistent and plangent chords from colonial history.

Then again, how monstrous is Caliban? A once-famous book, Daniel Wilson's *Caliban: The Missing Link* (1873) saw him in Darwinian terms. This interpretation governed F. R. Benson's tree-dwelling Caliban, for many years an applauded performance. Other Calibans have projected fins, scales, deformities, barely anthropoid features. But many others show Caliban as a man, undeformed, and the authors cite a black Caliban at the Folger (1990), Raphael Nash, whose magnificent physique dominated the proceedings. This was perhaps a return to Rousseau's Noble Savage; it made Prospero's disgust into racism. The marvellously eclectic record of stage history makes clear that there is no single authoritative line of progress.

I can see two main tracks for the stage Caliban. One approach places him in history, with distinctive ethnic characteristics. He thus becomes the victim of colonial oppression. Jonathan Miller, in his rigorously post-colonial productions (1970: 1988) worked from Ottavio Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban*, and cast both Ariel and Caliban as blacks. (The

first as an Ibo, the second as a Hausa.) The other approach makes Caliban an anthropoid, with some disturbingly non-human features (reminiscent of *The Elephant Man*). This alternative line takes Caliban out of history.

It is, I think, the favored route today. The authors are probably right to suggest that Caliban's Third World role is now a vogue past its prime. It was a commanding insight (or analogue), but it has hardened into a cliché. Casting Caliban with a black actor was once (1945) a novelty; now it is routine. Caliban's present and near future seem to lie with him as a symbol of the disinherited, the dispossessed, those excluded from the fuller humanity of their luckier neighbors. It will remain true, as Frank Kermode said in the quoted epigraph for this book, that "Caliban is the core of the play."