

Book Reviews

H.R. Coursen. *Shakespeare: The Two Traditions*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999. Pp 271.

H.R. Coursen's *Shakespeare: The Two Traditions* is undeniably impressive in its scope and in its marvellous insights into recent stage and film productions of Shakespeare's plays; and for these reasons, it is well worth reading. The title of this book gives very little away, however; in fact, although it emerges that the book is concerned with the two traditions of Shakespeare in the theatre and Shakespeare on screen, an overall purpose was never made clear to me. The book is divided into two sections: 'Shakespeare on Stage' and 'Shakespeare on Film'. The first section contains chapters analysing *Henry V* and *Henry VI* on stage, three *Tempests* and one *Macbeth*, recent *Hamlet* productions and *Hamlet* and Shakespeare repertory. The second section includes chapters on the films of *Richard III*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Branagh's *A Midwinter's Tale*, Parker's *Othello* and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* and finally, Branagh's *Hamlet*. While reading, I was desperately searching for a thread to pull these chapters together, or some justification for the inclusion of these productions and the exclusion of so many others. Coursen initially attempts to link these discrete discussions by suggesting that those that succeed do so because they retain an 'archetype' crucial to the source texts. He explains in his introduction that productions of Shakespeare are successful when they retain the 'archetypes' in the text which are 'not some immutable carving of "truth"' but are 'beneath the surface, subtexts for the words, and available to cultures for whom the original words are a foreign language' (27). For me, this was a somewhat weak attempt to make sense of what seems a hugely amorphous project.

As Coursen self-deprecatingly states in his introduction, 'not all interpretations of these interpretations will agree with each other. Reviewers of this book will make this clear' (43). Accordingly, I feel honour-bound to say that I disagree with a number of Coursen's readings (especially, his attack on Loncraine's *Richard III*). Normally, I would agree to disagree if the author did not assume that his reader was complicit with his views throughout. Disconcertingly, Coursen moves frequently in the theatre section from talking about his reactions to a general audience reaction, replacing 'we' with 'I'. Is it true, for

example, that 'we' all discover what Stephen Greenblatt calls "eucharistic anxiety" in *Hamlet* (99)? Or do 'we' all learn, 'that, in the hands of skilful directors, Shakespeare *is* our culture' (76)? Although Coursen draws on an impressive range of stage productions of Shakespeare in the first section, this is the weaker of the two parts of the book. His staccato style of writing, combined with a penchant for citations, is a real challenge to the reader, especially in the discussion of stage productions that most of us haven't seen. On many pages, virtually every sentence contains a quotation from a critic; while seeking to appear authoritative, this seemingly endless stream of quotations diminishes the book's clarity.

Certainly, the second section is easier to read, because most readers will have some direct experience of the film texts discussed and because Coursen writes in a less cryptic fashion, more in his own voice in which he is able to sustain his interpretations at more length. Although, as in the previous section, I had difficulty in seeing a development from one chapter to the next, his reading of Shakespeare on screen is always lively and impressively detailed. His response to the films is, as he half-heartedly admits, conservative (153), especially in the case of Loncraine's *Richard III* which he dismisses as 'a parody of Hollywood films, at times mildly amusing, most of the time simply grotesque, a shallow, meretricious shadow of the stage production' (141). He cannot abide this film as he claims the director substitutes another text for Shakespeare's play (153), detaching it from its archetype (141), seemingly based on the link made between Shakespeare's Richard and Fascism. Again, possibly conservatism creeps in here – almost imperceptibly he adopts the 'not as good as the book argument' (or the book, as he reads it, as it cannot be assumed that we all agree on the play's 'archetype'), an approach he rejects elsewhere. I suspect his preference for what I would regard as the vastly inferior *Looking for Richard* is based on its sycophantic reverence for Shakespeare, in opposition to Loncraine's *Richard III* which takes daring liberties with Shakespeare's play. Coursen is at his best in the discussion of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* in which he convincingly accounts for the film's overwhelming popularity, especially in his identification and discussion of the film's major metaphor – religion and its irrelevance. His eye for detail is striking and indeed, this is the strength of the book as a whole. In the conclusion, Coursen argues that 'Shakespeare on film and Shakespeare in the theater, for all of their differences in mode, audience and expectation ... are indissolubly knit' (241); for me, the book is far too disjointed to sustain such an argument and it cannot be read in such a way. Surely, Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* cannot be seen to be 'indissolubly knit'

to theatrical traditions. It is the discrete and insightful observations of both stage and film productions, rather than its overall approach to Shakespeare in the theatre and on film, that make this book worth reading.

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John D.Cox. *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp x, 257.

This wide-ranging study of the use of the devil in medieval, Elizabethan and Stuart drama has much to recommend it. It treats an impressive number of plays, picking out several authors, notably Bale, Marlowe, Jonson and Dekker, whose contributions to the role of the devil, as well as their influence, are effectively examined in some depth. The work promotes a substantial thesis on the devil as a stage character, but in doing so it may have omitted a number of other considerations which ‘make not for it’: we shall return to these below. It is also written in such a way as to challenge and clarify continuities between traditional chronological categories, and this too is to be welcomed.

The theoretical position adopted by Cox is essentially a social one, and his analysis continually avails itself of a social vocabulary in order to describe it. Thus the devil in medieval drama is seen primarily as a threat to a sacramental society, and his manifestation is primarily associated with feudal power structures. Because of this, it is argued that the model for the devil is frequently drawn from upper classes in society. This account runs broadly through the chief genres of medieval drama, but a change is marked by the work of Bale, who brought in a Protestant perspective, and Marlowe, whose moral ambiguity Cox carefully and successfully illuminates as seminal for change. Such developments are made apparent by an innovatory association of the devil with Catholicism, a concept in itself dependent upon the Reformation. Cox also wisely associates change with developments in the nature of the drama in the sixteenth century. The chief effect is that the devil came to be associated with commoners, and a major thrust of Cox’s theory here proposes that this association is substantially the emphasis of seventeenth-century dramatists. In discussing their drama, Cox again includes a range of genres, and among them are many plays not frequently read, cited, or performed. Interestingly a goodly number of these relatively unknown plays are collaborations, and the material adduced here may well be used to clarify the interactions among the co-authors. As well, Cox delivers a repeated, even repetitive, attack upon the ‘evolutionary’