

Alexander Leggatt (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp xviii, 237.

The thirteen essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* are united by a focus on 'the play of similarity and difference' (xiv). Each shows an awareness of the traditions and conventions of comedy and comic drama known to Shakespeare, and of the ways in which he worked within and against such expectations. All are clear and authoritative, for the most part avoiding academic jargon. Frequent apt quotation from writers preceding and contemporary with Shakespeare as well as from his own plays should serve to whet the reader's appetite for further acquaintance with the texts discussed. References to modern comedy, particularly in films, encourage the reader to connect the experience of the present with the exploration of the past.

After a characteristically engaging introduction by the editor, Alexander Leggatt, the volume is divided into two parts. Part 1 consists of five essays dealing with the resources available to Shakespeare in theories of comedy, in the drama of Rome, Italy, and England, and in popular festivity. David Galbraith reviews classical accounts of comedy and laughter, and shows how these ideas were transmitted and elaborated in the Renaissance. He moves deftly through the centuries, beginning through quotation from Cicero with a graceful recognition of the difficulty of theorizing about comedy, and citing Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to remind the reader of Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy; quotations from the opposed treatises of Gosson and Lodge link the classical texts to the sixteenth century. His survey of classical traditions of laughter and comedy is made specific and lively by abundant quotation from Aristotle, Lactantius, Cicero, Donatus and more; references to Rabelais and Freud suggest the vitality and continuity of the traditions. Galbraith proceeds to show how the ideas were transmitted to the Renaissance through the school curriculum and through influential 'rhetorical models of decorum' (11) such as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. A return to Aristotle leads to discussion of the treatises of Robortello and Castelvetro, and thence to the conclusion which points to Sidney, Jonson, and Shakespeare. Robert Miola's essay on Roman comedy also pays attention to the ways in which classical influence, in this case of Plautus and Terence, was transmitted to sixteenth century England. He details that influence under four headings concerned with language, stage action, acting masks (character types), and plot construction, and illustrates its effects upon Shakespeare's plays and those of a wide range of other playwrights. Louise Clubb summarizes the conventionally studied Italian sources of Shakespeare's plays, and then turns to her special interest of the 'richer harvest of

connections' to be found in 'general Italian theatrical practice and repertory' (35). She traces 'theatregams' possibly imported by Shakespeare from Italian plays into his own, both comedies such as *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado about Nothing* and the tragedies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, and notes that Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and his late romances are akin to the Italian pastoral or *favola boscareccia*. Janette Dillon examines the types of stage comedy found in sixteenth century England, from great house, court, school and university to the beginnings of the public stage. She gives due prominence to Peele, Lyly, and Greene, but her interest in 'the instinct for mixing comic elements into various kinds of dramatic structures' (48) leads her to devote what seems to me a disproportionate amount of space to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. (She does not mention Charlotte Spivack's *The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage*.) Francois Laroque's essay on popular festivity concentrates on annually recurring festivities of Church and Court, in many of which were commemorated 'a host of popular beliefs and traditions' (64). In Shakespeare's plays Laroque finds 'a surprising ability to appropriate both the religious and secular calendars', an 'interest in deviance from and exceptions to the rule', and thus freedom 'to upset or subvert the routines of long-established tradition' (74).

Seven of the eight essays making up Part 2 set 'groups of plays [not excluding the final romances] together around recurring themes, structural principles, and comic techniques', and the last treats the romances 'as a distinctive form within their own tradition' (xv). John Creaser plays with ideas of confusion and disorientation, both in Shakespeare's plays and in his audience. He stresses the stretching of convention and challenging of norms and prejudices in 'Shakespeare's profoundly unconventional art' (91). Catherine Bates views courtship as 'a form of initiation rite' (105), 'a transitional phase and liminal state' which encourages the dramatic exploration of the clash between 'the chaotic nature of human sexuality and the laws that set out to govern it' (106). She contrasts the 'moral and emotional chaos' (113) that she sees as the subject of Shakespeare's romantic comedy with the formal perfection of their highly developed art. Edward Berry finds both ambiguity and irony in Shakespearean laughter, concluding that his 'comedy disorients, breaks down psychological and social boundaries, finds laughter in the very fluidity and mystery of human experience, and perpetually calls into question who is "self" and who is "other"' (136–7). Ambiguity governs Alexander Leggatt's exploration of doubleness, doubling, and *double entendre* (linguistic and visual) in Shakespeare's treatment of sex in his comedies and romances. Lynne Magnusson gives a determinedly ideological slant to detailed analyses of four aspects of linguistic art in selected

comedies, and Barbara Hodgdon leans to a feminist perspective in considering how sexual disguise works in performance, drawing on evidence that ranges from eyewitness accounts in Shakespeare's time to the recent film *Shakespeare in Love*. Anthony Miller's interpretation of 'Matters of state' reflects twenty-first-century attitudes towards what are perceived as early modern views of 'the workings of law or the exercise of authority' (198), commerce, anti-semitism, and colonialism. Michael O'Connell's final essay emphasizes the experimental nature and self-consciousness of the last comedies or romances in which he finds 'art willing to judge itself, to assert the truth of its claims and at the same time to preserve a skeptical awareness of itself as an imaginative construction' (228).

As a collection of fresh, accessible essays on Shakespearean comedy the volume is successful, but as a companion in the sense of a reference guide it may disappoint. Even the essays in Part 1, which are useful in providing a quick overview of background material, suffer from the lack of individual reading lists (such as in the de Grazia/Wells *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*) or individual annotated bibliographies (such as in the Braunmuller/Hattaway *Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*). The 'Select Bibliography' (230–33) is severely limited, and unannotated. The index does not cover the footnotes of the essays, and is not always a reliable guide to what is mentioned in their body. Such sparse annotation and cross-referencing undercuts one of the virtues of the volume, the authors' ability to stimulate a desire for further reading. For example, the quotation from Ascham on p. 32 is unannotated, the reference on p. 133 is unindexed, and the footnote on p. 138 does not enticingly specify *The Scholemaster*, to encourage a reader to seek out the whole of Ascham's wonderfully italophobic diatribe. Similar lacunae affect references to Sidney and Gascoigne; Sidney, frequently mentioned as theorist and artistic model, particularly deserves fuller bibliographic treatment. Despite the three chapters on Shakespeare criticism and reference books in the de Grazia/Wells *Companion*, it would have been helpful to include in this volume a survey devoted to the history of criticism, current trends, and sources of information for the comedies in particular.

Cambridge University Press deserves a note of recognition for the high standard of proofreading, regrettably rare these days even from academic presses. My eye was caught by only one error, 'cacaphonous' for 'cacophonous' on p. 106. In the same paragraph some might object that paraphrasing Puttenham's 'noise of the laughing lamenting spouse' as 'screams' misrepresents the 'sweet snatches of delight' and 'merry play' of the wedding night, which, as in Spenser's *Epithalamion*, is the usual end of Shakespearean romantic comedy.

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