CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

Introductory

This is a history which tries to trace a revolution in Shakespeare's fortunes both on the stage and in the study during this century. 'Revolution' seems to be the appropriate word for an unusual turn-about in both criticism and performance. One grand discovery of the twentieth century is that Shakespeare knew his business as a playwright. On the one hand, this century has seen directors turn a complete somersault in their approach to the production of his plays. The stage has moved from the elaborate decoration of Beerbohm Tree to the austerities of Peter Hall, from the illusory realism of Henry Irving to the non-illusory statements of Peter Brook. Through this development some have felt that our generation knows more of the genuine Shakespeare experience than our grandfathers did.[1] On the other hand, the new academia has encouraged a phenomenal growth in Shakespeare scholarship and criticism, and this has ranged from the circumstantial character analysis of Bradley, through digressive studies in imagery and word patterns after Spurgeon, to the inspirational, impulsive visions of Wilson Knight. Harley Granville-Barker's verdict was:

> His plays have had every sort of treatment. Actors have twisted them up into swagger shapes, scholars have rolled them flat, producers have immured them in scenery.[2]

He went on to say that the one tribute still to be paid to them was to discover what, as plays, they essentially are.

Could the Shakespeare of the stage and the study have been the same man, the plays the same plays? The Shakespeare industry branched in such different directions that it scarcely seemed to have the same root. This is a sad reflection on how our first of playwrights has been regarded by those who teach and play him, and a worse reflection on our general failure to see the drama as requiring a mutual discipline of study and performance.

A few warning voices were heard in the early years. William Poel

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

and the Elizabethan Stage Society must take the credit for trying as practically as possible to show that Shakespeare should be understood in his own medium. Before he became professor of English literature at Oxford, Sir Walter Raleigh had written to Poel, 'I am sure the only thing for Shakespeare critics is to go back to the Globe and Fortune and understand them.'[3] In the correspondence surrounding Percy Simpson's work on the punctuation of the original text[4] Granville-Barker threw in his weight with

> It is unwise to decide upon any disputed passage without seeing it in *action*, without canvassing all its dramatic possibilities. For a definitive text, we need first a Shakespeare Theatre in which a generation of scholars may be as used to seeing as to reading the play.[5]

Addressing the Royal Society of Literature, Granville-Barker drew attention to the fact that an overwhelming proportion of dramatic criticism 'is written by people who, you might suppose, could never have been inside a theatre in their lives'. His plea was for a new school of Shakespeare criticism based upon experiment with the plays in the theatre.[6]

From another quarter at about this time, there were signs that the drama was being regarded with less of the Puritan prejudice that for so long banished it to academic limbo. In 1919 Geoffrey Whitworth founded the British Drama League to encourage the art of the theatre both amateur and professional, and to urge the material establishment of such fantasies as a national theatre, drama departments in universities and a drama curriculum in the schools. The bigger American universities began the practical study of drama, generating some of the impulse to create community theatre in the USA. Recognizing the close relationship between the theatre and social life, a correspondent to *The Times* was found writing,

> We are apt to think of the drama, in its lower reaches, as mere tomfoolery, in its higher as a Cinderella-sister to literature.... But, however natural an upgrowth from the soil drama may be, it needs no less than other such products its refinery of thought, which it should find, surely, in our universities. Here what is needed is something like a Faculty of Personal Expression. . . .[7]

The writer dared to advocate that 'certain aspects' of music and 'even' of dancing constitute part of the study.

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

Introductory

It is hard to believe how few were willing to acknowledge that the actor and director of a play, not to mention its spectators, acquire special insights which can only develop in the actual presentation of a play, tested by a live audience. The first and last values of drama are revealed in the response of an audience in a theatre, and all else must be secondary and speculative. Nor does an actor's best thinking about his part emerge in some vacuum of novelty: he is the closest student of a play who offers himself in it, as if naked, to the public view. At the same time, what serious director dare ignore the best kind of dramatic scholarship?

The record of any direct indebtedness of criticism to practice, or of practice to criticism, is ridiculously sparse. Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt gave the impression that John Philip Kemble at Drury Lane and Covent Garden 'had succeeded in stamping his own image of Macbeth on the imagination of a whole generation of critics'.[8] Goethe's notion of Hamlet as a pale and melancholy romantic finally emerged as Henry Irving's gentle, lovesick Prince, imitated by a score of others in this vein.[9] Beerbohm Tree's programme note to his Macbeth at the Haymarket in 1911 acknowledged the 'inspiring' study of the character by Bradley.[10] Dover Wilson believed that our understanding of *Love's Labour's Lost* was completely changed by Guthrie's production at the Old Vic in 1936.[11] In his work on the production of *King Lear* at Stratford in 1962, Peter Brook was excited by Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, which had just appeared in its French edition. All of this, however, is ephemeral and a matter of chance: any true interaction between study and stage runs deeper, and points as much to the history of taste as of perception.

In spite of the chasm between acting and criticism, Shakespeare production since Irving and Beerbohm Tree has undergone something of a revolution, comparable and in parallel with a less apparent, but no less profound, change in criticism. Certain productions beginning with the courageous attacks on tradition by William Poel and Granville-Barker have marked the progress of the change. The work of these men did echo contemporary scholarship, though it owed less than is thought to that psychological speculation about character which any good actor had always regarded as his personal prerogative, or to the literary interest in word and image patterns, which often requires that

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

a play be read backwards to arrive at the point.[12] The former assumed the play to be a realistic novel, the latter a metaphysical poem. As men of the theatre, the best practitioners accepted that an actor's and director's first duty was to be loyal to their author by first making him acceptable to their audience, but the finest directors of the twentieth century sought to interpret Shakespeare's meaning by looking increasingly to his own stage practice. The secret of what he intended lies in how he worked.

It is questionable whether the real advances in Shakespeare scholarship in this century have come through verbal and thematic studies. A stronger claim can be made for another line of scholarship more directly related to the practical business of staging a play, research which can be traced from the new interest in the Elizabethan playhouse and its conventions after the discovery of the Swan drawing in 1888 and W. W. Greg's publication of Henslowe's *Diary* and *Papers* between 1904 and 1908. The interest in the playhouse was a first sign of an even more important concern with Elizabethan playing conditions, the form these imposed on the playwriting and thence the nature of the Elizabethan dramatic experience. The new direction for study is early seen in the work on the playhouses by the Malone Society after 1906, and by scholars like J. Q. Adams, A. H. Thorndike, W. J. Lawrence and E. K. Chambers in the first years of this century. This in turn is to be linked with what has been called the 'workshop' approach to the plays, associated at first with such names as R. G. Moulton, George Pierce Baker and Arthur Quiller-Couch.[13]

Yet the matter is not simple, since theatrical sensibility is hardly confined to the study. While Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society were rediscovering their Shakespeare by testing him in a mock-up of his own conditions, European theatre at large was already reacting against the realism of the proscenium arch. Men of immense theatrical influence – Adolphe Appia, Meyerhold, Gordon Craig, Georg Fuchs, Max Reinhardt and others – were bent on demolishing the concept of theatre-as-illusion. By the time Granville Barker set up his daring impressionist productions of the comedies at the Savoy in 1912 and 1914, the notion that theatre had to reproduce life by verisimilitude was already succumbing to the non-illusory assaults of the theatre men. Had they known, the students of Elizabethan dramatic convention might eventually have found themselves marching in step with such

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

scandalous avant-gardists as Pirandello, Cocteau, Brecht, Genêt and others who have returned its former elasticity to the stage.

The new Shakespeare, often bitterly derided by the traditionalists, did not, however, make his appearance on any make-shift Elizabethan stage. The real sense of change came when such apparent eccentrics as Nigel Playfair, Barry Jackson and Tyrone Guthrie sought repeatedly to give their audiences what they took to be the stuff of the Shakespeare experience. As far as it could be reclaimed three centuries later, they tried to capture and translate the temper of the original. Each man's search was for an authentic balance between the freedom a Shakespeare script grants the actor and the responsibility of recharging the play's first meaning. Where Granville-Barker had aimed at a new unity of tone and effect by returning to Shakespeare's text and structural continuity, the new men aimed at hitting a modern approximation to the Elizabethan *mode* of performance.

While a few brilliant directors pursued their Elizabethan Shakespeare on the stage, at the same time a few scholars were looking more closely at Elizabethan dramatic conventions. E. E. Stoll, Levin Schücking and, later, M. C. Bradbrook pursued a more objective, less impressionistic criticism; they hoped to blow away what Granville-Barker called the transcendental fog of nineteenth-century thinking about Shakespeare. Characters were to be understood in period, and not in terms of modern realistic motivation. This development of historical criticism was soon matched by an increasing interest in the thrust stage as a practical medium for production. A surprising post-Second World War spurt in scholarship on the Elizabethan playhouse is associated with a much longer list of distinguished names: G. F. Reynolds, G. R. Kernodle, G. E. Bentley, Cranford Adams, Walter Hodges, Leslie Hotson, Glynne Wickham, Richard Southern, Bernard Beckerman and Richard Hosley. Although most of these would not claim to be dramatic critics, it is clear that each shares the idea of non-illusory Elizabethan performance, controlled by the medium of the playhouse. The flexible Elizabethan mode of performance, playing to the house, stepping in and out of character, generating a stage action allegorical and symbolic, making no pretence at the trappings of realism, encouraged a verbally acute, sensory and participatory, multi-levelled and fully aware mode of experience for an audience.

Meanwhile Tyrone Guthrie was working on his plans for his first

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

festival theatre with projecting stage at Stratford in Ontario (1953). Designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, it was based on Guthrie's conviction that 'a play can be best presented by getting as near as possible to the manner in which the author envisaged its performance'. Its success was another new departure, and the Stratford, Ontario stage became the pattern for new theatre-building throughout America and England.

There is no question but that the actors spurned most of the scholarship and criticism which seemed to lead readers away from the aural and visual heart of the play experience. The schoolroom lacks the corrective aura of the theatre, and, for students, criticism which is not stage-centred has been the source of much enervating treatment of Shakespeare, the liveliest of playwrights. However, some of the more fruitful research of recent years has been in the history of performance, reconstructed through promptbooks and contemporary reports.[14] Such work recognized directions for future Shakespeare studies, and brought practice and criticism into a healthier alliance for the benefit of both the stage and the study.

In retrospect, it seems no coincidence that the new direction and focus of scholarly thinking about Shakespeare, together with the new freedom from the constrictions of realism and the proscenium arch, should culminate in Peter Brook's landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Stratford in England in 1970. This performance fittingly brings the first phase of the story to a close. It is easy to be deceived by Brook's apparently non-Elizabethan devices. The plays of Shakespeare, although the most familiar in the classical repertory, remain the most subject to variation in performance: the mode of non-illusory theatre is still remote and elusive for modern actors and spectators. What may at first seem outrageous in a production – fairies in gold paint, a Hamlet in plus-fours, the Athenian lovers in a gymnasium – may actually be urging upon the audience the true substance of the make-believe.

The call for a stage-centred study of Shakespeare is not new, nor has it been fully answered. William Poel is the father of this history, but his voice was eccentric in his time. Granville-Barker lent his greater authority to the movement, and in *The Exemplary Theatre*,[15] his manifesto of principles for a national theatre, he wrote a seminal essay which must have seemed out of key with the profession and its ways:

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

> The matured actor's best chance of developing his art and observing his progress lies less in the performances he gives than in his opportunities for study, and especially for the co-operative study (the only valid kind, as we have seen and must further see) involved in the rehearsing of a play.

To ask the actor to study more and perform less was hardly realistic in 1922, but is now the established policy of the Royal Shakespeare Company since Peter Hall's administration. We note, incidentally, the link between better stage practice and a subsidized repertory system.

With the fearlessness of youth Muriel Bradbrook put the case for a stage-centred understanding of Shakespeare in her prize essay of 1931, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions: A Study of their Place in the Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays.*[16] It was an outright attack upon the academic Shakespeare industry.

> It is a curious fact that [the study of stage conditions], the latest to be studied, should be the most indisputably direct influence upon the plays . . . but it is only during the last thirty years that a detailed investigation of stage conditions has been carried out.

She pointed out that Malone's scholarly pioneer work on the stage conditions[18] had been ignored for a hundred years. Why did this matter? Because critics who forget the stage can get their premises wrong:

> Writers of appreciative criticism who neglect the historic approach are liable to blunder on questions of tone; to mistake conventions for faults, to rationalise an illogical custom of the theatre, or to miss the point of a device. . . . But perhaps the chief value of the knowledge of stage conditions is a negative one. It prevents wrong assumptions, or the laying of emphasis in the wrong place. This unobtrusive correcting of the critical focus is almost impossible to define or describe, like the change of vision produced by wearing glasses.[19]

Reviewing the critical record, Dr Bradbrook remarked the dislike shared by Coleridge, Lamb and Hazlitt of their own representational stage, and their 'inability to conceive of any other'. Coleridge, for example, condemned Shakespeare's 'naked room, a blanket for a curtain', and Dr Bradbrook aptly commented, 'It apparently never occurred to him that a naked room might make a suitable background for Shakespeare.'[20]

The inability to conceive of some other mode of theatre is the trouble

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

still, and, in the second impression of her book in 1962, Dr Bradbrook rather flattered the modern theatre by suggesting that the twentieth century had abolished the picture stage,[21] coming closer to its Elizabethan forerunner than any other. She was too optimistic in believing that we had at last learned to recognize and respect the dramatic conventions of the Elizabethans.[22] But she smelt the wind. A practical knowledge of the living theatre has enriched scholarship, and on all sides there are signs of fresh thinking.

At random: Bernard Grebanier believes that the simplicity of *Hamlet* on the stage has been distorted by academic criticism.[23] Harry Levin has remarked the 'renewed concentration on [Shakespeare] in his natural habitat, the theatre', and believes that 'the next generation – not without gratitude – could undertake to synthesize and interpret with more freedom and more security'.[24] John Russell Brown believes that the shocking gap between the actor and the academic could be bridged by keeping a scene-by-scene record of every major production.[25] Maurice Charney cuts new ground in the study of the character of Hamlet by recognizing the self-conscious artifice of Elizabethan stage illusion and the play's obsession with acting *per se*.[26] Stanley Wells, commenting on the 'discovery' by the R.S.C. in 1964 that Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* was a viable play in the theatre, raises another issue: 'The reading of plays in an untheatrical way can help to contribute to their neglect in the professional theatre and to their under-valuation.'[27] While he believes that the writings of Shakespeare critics can perform a valuable service to the theatre,[28] Wells conversely insists that 'theatrical experience of the plays is necessary for a Shakespeare critic'.[29]

Performance-experiment and performance-analysis have at least this claim to validity, that those devices of Elizabethan origin which can be made to work, those rhythms of speech, the flexing of character, illusion and the structural orchestration of the play, when tried upon a live audience assembled in conditions of theatre, are less open to the irrelevancies of impressionistic criticism for which the writer need consult no one other than himself. Norman Rabkin may summarize the matter for us. The English Institute Essays he recently collected[30] provoked a foreword in which he marked a distinct shift in approach to the criticism of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. All the collected papers discuss drama 'as earlier critics neither could nor wanted to:

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

the play as it impinges on its audience, as it is experienced'. The acknowledged debt is to the stage itself. His authors

> seem to agree also that the new concern is best served by a new kind of scrutiny of the play itself. In the view which I believe they hold in common of the work of art as a complex and highly determined shaping of an audience's responses, the writers are freed from the increasingly deadening obligation to an old paradigm to reduce works to meanings.[31]

The search is on, for the theatrical effect and experience of the original performance, in the belief that the meaning is in the experience.

It is probably too soon to tell whether the critic's sense of the new Shakespeare has moved closer to the actor's, or vice versa. Nevertheless, in tracing the development of our understanding of Shakespeare as it reveals itself in and out of the theatre and in its progress from Victorian illusion to Elizabethan non-illusion over the last hundred years, the present investigation will find that actor and critic often have more in common than would at first appear.

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521273285 - The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century
J. L. Styan
Excerpt
More information

1

Victorian Shakespeare

> When individuals walk about the stage with measured steps, stand in symmetrical positions, raising their hands first to their breasts, then towards the heavens, then towards the earth, making recitals of every speech they utter, I feel sure it is fatal to all interpretation of character. . . . A man, when he tells his friends he hopes to go to heaven, does not point towards the sky to demonstrate his meaning. Why, then, should it be done on the stage?[1]

William Poel wrote this in response to an average Drury Lane production of *Hamlet* in 1874. It is salutary to be reminded of how playgoers saw Shakespeare a hundred years ago.[2] Playgoers who today are more accustomed to bare boards and a symbolic spotlight against a non-representational skeleton set may find it hard to understand the satisfaction with which our predecessors viewed the spectacular realism of Kemble and the Keans, Macready, Phelps, Irving and Tree while still accepting the declamatory school of acting.[3] Theirs was satisfaction indeed, with rarely a doubt. Moreover, the mid-Victorians were hearing more of Shakespeare's words. The insistent criticism of men of letters like Coleridge, Lamb and Hazlitt had taken effect, and enthusiasts congratulated themselves on a steady return to Shakespeare's text under Robert Elliston, Edmund Kean, William Macready and Samuel Phelps.

For in spite of the new bardolatry at the end of the eighteenth century, in the early years of the nineteenth the hacking and plastering of Shakespeare for the stage was still normal practice. *Henry IV, Part I* lost its mock trial because the scene was too long, although, like its sequel *Henry IV, Part II*, it was rarely played because of 'the want of ladies' in the cast. *Measure for Measure* was purged of its 'bawdy' scenes for the sake of propriety, and *The Merchant of Venice* lost much of Bassanio for the sake of convenience. *Twelfth Night* sacrificed 'O mistress mine' and 'Come away, death' because Feste was played by a woman. Polonius was always played for a buffoon, and so Laertes had to manage without his father's words of wisdom. Hamlet did not give