

Jeffrey S. Doty. *Shakespeare, Popularity, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp vii, 210. Hardback £75.00. ISBN: 9781107163379.

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For their word of 2017, Cambridge Dictionaries picked ‘populism’, defined as ‘political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want’, with the added usage label ‘mainly disapproving’.¹ It is an appropriate coda to Jeffrey S. Doty’s book. Although his detailed and illuminating exploration of popularity and publicity in Shakespeare’s plays is resolutely historical, there are occasional glimpses of a more presentist critique, and this cognate modern word ‘populism’ carries something of the shifting ideological charge of ‘popularity’ in late Elizabethan England. Doty’s chapters consider individual plays from *Richard II* to *Coriolanus*. His writing is always lucid and readable, and his method of close reading evinces real, infectious enjoyment.

Doty traces the evolving early modern meanings of ‘popularity’, from its sixteenth-century beginnings in anti-puritan rhetoric, via the crowd-winning tactics made visible by the Duc de Guise’s short rule in France, to the alignment of the word with the dashing Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, during the 1590s. John Florio’s *World of Words* of 1598 identified popularity both as the state of being loved by the people, and as the politic means of garnering such affection. Tudor political wisdom argued that to gain favourable public opinion was a good thing, but to be seen to cultivate it akin to sedition: popularity was to be granted rather than sought. Doty argues that this popularity paradox is explored in Shakespeare’s plays, where historical characters such as Bolingbroke, Caesar, and Coriolanus are shown to seek public favour and thus bring playgoer scrutiny to contemporary questions of political technique and public opinion. ‘Most of all’, Doty argues, ‘Shakespeare made playgoers aware of themselves as members of a public’ (28).

The London theatres created and trained this newly politically engaged public. Doty foregrounds his plays as scripts for performance in the outdoor playhouses, making for an illuminating parallel between the political popularity explored within the plays, and their own role in the economy of theatre-going. One of Shakespeare’s most common images for popularity is gluttony. Doty’s account of Falstaff’s role in the serial *Henry IV* plays cleverly interweaves the idea of audience over-indulgence with the fat knight’s own signature excesses. The Epilogue

to *2 Henry IV* promises more Falstaff ‘if you be not too much cloyed with fat meat’; his absence from *Henry V* works for Doty’s argument rather like Conan Doyle’s deadly ‘Final Problem’ for his detective hero at the Reichenbach Falls. Like Sherlock Holmes, Falstaff has been eagerly devoured by the public: ‘Shakespeare’s only chance to free himself from his audience’s demands was by killing these popular characters off’ (96). More attention to the ongoing vitality of Falstaff in print and in popular allusion might have been a useful amplification of the analogy between commercial theatre and the attempts of politicians to gain public favour. Elsewhere, Doty’s indifference to material texts and the history of Shakespeare in print leaves some relevant parallels unexplored. For example, the ‘new additions of the Parliament Sceane’ advertised in one issue of the 1608 quarto of *Richard II* might have corroborated his analysis of parliamentary allusions in the contemporaneous *Coriolanus*.

Similarly, when considering *Measure for Measure*, Doty works with a rather old-fashioned version of the text as essentially an early Jacobean play with some insignificant later additions by Thomas Middleton, acknowledged and dismissed in a single footnote. Nevertheless, this is a striking chapter that revisits and revitalizes an old trope about Jacobean politics in the ‘disguised ruler’ theme. Doty pays attention to the currency of news and gossip in the play’s Vienna as part of a nascent public sphere, and argues that the Duke’s attempt to stem this disorderly public aims to turn ‘proto-citizens back into obedient subjects’ (133). His argument about how the play collocates sex and publicity is revelatory: he unpicks one of Angelo’s fraught soliloquies that likens his own illicit desire for Isabella with that of ‘the general subject to a well-wish’d king’, showing how sex, public discourse, and monarchical power circulate in *Measure for Measure*. The play critiques elite forms of publicity even as it participates in the kinds of public discourse that its authority figures attempt to suppress.

If the chapter on *Julius Caesar* seems more familiar, this is in part because of the coherence of Doty’s overall thesis, which helps us to anticipate the importance of the analogies between citizens and theatregoers. Here Doty makes confident critical use of Shakespeare’s sources, showing how changes Shakespeare makes to the importance placed by the conspirators on gaining popular favour corresponds to Shakespeare’s political and dramatic interest in popularity.

Throughout, Doty’s texts feature as linguistic rather than theatrical artefacts, however. One tantalizing footnote on Ralph Fiennes’s 2011 film of *Coriolanus* made me long for the admission of more performance history into his account: that final chapter, hinging on Coriolanus’s death in a moment of collective public violence, is more attentive to dramaturgy and is the stronger for it. At times the

distinction Doty makes between Elizabeth (courted and gained popularity) and James (neither) seems over-simplistic and obscures the attitudes of the people by focusing on the tactics and rhetoric of propaganda. What is interesting about Richard Mulcaster's focus on Elizabeth's 'grace with the common people during her coronation procession' (7) is not that it tells us something about Elizabeth, still less about popular attitudes to her. Rather it inscribes a certain spectacular condescension as part of the rhetoric of monarchy.

In his conclusion to *Shakespeare, Popularity and the Public Sphere*, Doty cites approvingly Franco Moretti's compelling historicist argument about the inevitability of Charles I's execution as a consequence of the politics of demystification in early modern tragedy. His own study has some of the same earnest high politics of the scholarship of the 1980s, and an underlying belief in the serious didactic work of the theatre. But at its best, this book anatomizes, with a close attention to poetic language and semantic instability, a theatrical and political culture busily negotiating terms between the people and its politicians, be they on- or offstage.

Notes

- 1 Cambridge Words, 'Cambridge Dictionary's Word of the Year 2017', *About Words*, 29 November 2017, <https://dictionaryblog.cambridge.org/2017/11/29/cambridge-dictionary-word-of-the-year-2017/>.

