

David Ruiters. *Shakespeare's Festive History: Feasting, Festivity, Fasting, and Lent in the Second Henriad*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003. Pp vii, 204.

The study of festivity has produced a number of distinguished works by Shakespearians such as C.L. Barber, Robert Weimann, Michael Bristol, François Laroque, and Naomi Conn Liebler. These scholars brought to bear research on social practices of festivity and, Bristol and Liebler especially, a range of theoretical and anthropological insights of authors ranging from Bakhtin and Girard to Mary Douglas. Especially given that this body of work includes the titles *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* and *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy*, and that Shakespeare's most interesting history play, *1 Henry IV*, is also his most festive, the topic of festivity in the history plays clearly demands exploration in its own right.

While his predecessors all cast wide nets, David Ruiters focuses prudently on two long-standing critical issues, arguing that the theme of festivity unites the plays of the second tetralogy (*Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *Henry V*), and that the forces of festivity and order find reconciliation there. Ruiters offers few original insights concerning the relation of festive social practices to the plays, nor does he evaluate or deploy the rich theoretical and methodological legacy provided by the above-named and other scholars. He does, however, perceptively address the large body of criticism relating in one way or another to festivity as it is represented in these plays, focusing on the implications of the tetralogy's alternation of festivity and order for understanding the pendulum of history itself.

The introduction surveys various critics who emphasize inappropriately a polarization of or contest between order and festivity in the plays, and the triumph of the former, for good or ill: eg Paola Pugliatti, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, Alexander Leggatt, Laroque, Shigeki Takada, Harry Berger, and Albert Cook. It also looks at others, such as Kiernan Ryan and Nigel Wood, who recognize the true kaleidoscopic or pluralistic nature of the plays, and Ruiters gleans hints of that ilk even from some of the same critics whose emphases are found to be mainly polarizing.

Each of the next four chapters is devoted to one of the plays in the tetralogy. These chapters, comprising shrewdly reasoned and patiently detailed commentaries, show how festivity and order work together and emphasize the role of festive themes in structuring and linking the plays. They also engage broadly with the body of criticism, though they treat critics in isolation from their

approaches, methods, and goals. J. Dover Wilson for instance is hailed for his emphasis on the association of Falstaff with food imagery, an emphasis Ruitter extends.

One interesting perception concerns Prince Hal's role in creating and sustaining a 'Feast of Falstaff.' That is, Hal (and later Shallow) is seen to sponsor Falstaff's festive antics rather than simply to engage with them or remain vulnerable to their power. However, as a festive participant Hal is never able to top Falstaff's improvisatory powers and his common touch, though Hal applies what he has learned from festive games to the task of royal rule. Here the theme of festivity proves revealing, though the insight sometimes comes at the expense of consideration of character and motive. One infers from Ruitter's glosses that Hal is basically calculating, though the possibility that he loves Falstaff is acknowledged. But the depth of Hal's possible ambivalence is not assessed. The goal emerges in the last chapter, rather, to understand the non-teleological nature of historical process through the complementary abstractions of order and festivity. The tetralogy's pendulum swings from Carnival to Lent and back exemplify how 'history is formed' 'as an arena of play' (186).

The success of Ruitter's reconciliatory reading of the alternation of order and festivity in the tetralogy is endangered by his failure sometimes to distinguish between the popular-festive leveling that Bakhtin, Weimann, and Bristol emphasize and a broader, anthropological sense of festivity that includes official, hierarchical rites that affirm social distinction. For in that broader sense there is by definition no necessary opposition between festivity and order that would require reconciliation. Nevertheless, this book's detailed, accessible map of the tetralogy as a coherent whole structured by festive alternations, along with its useful if miscellaneous compendium of scholarly insight and opinion, is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the important role of festivity in Shakespeare's history plays.

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