

BOOK REVIEWS

Keir Elam (ed). *Twelfth Night*. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008. Pp xx, 427.

Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton (eds). *Timon of Athens*. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008. Pp xx, 450.

I was introduced to the Arden Shakespeare when I was still at school, studying *The Winter's Tale* for A Level. For my generation, Arden editions possessed an indefinable mystique. Reliable, trustworthy, even infallible, they also managed to convey an enchanting sense of romantic idealism. 'Arden' was, after all, Shakespeare's pastoral idyll as well as a much-loved topographical feature of both his and my Warwickshire childhoods. The editors of these texts knew more about Shakespeare than mere mortals could ever aspire to learn, the surest proof being their tendency to print more notes than dialogue on each page.

When the third series of Arden began in the mid-1990s the prospect was thrilling, particularly with the promise of greater attention to the plays' theatrical dimensions. Previous editors' lack of interest in actual productions of Shakespeare's plays had proved one of Arden's few disappointments, promoting a frustrating sense for budding theatre-lovers that performance and scholarship were mutually exclusive. Arden 3 was launched with enormous promise; Jonathan Bate's edition of *Titus Andronicus* and T.W. Craik's of *Henry V* (both 1995) lived up to the hype, with Lois Potter's presentation of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1997) launching the exciting prospect of further additions to the Arden Shakespeare canon. Inevitably, it was not long before disappointment dulled the initial enthusiasm as subsequent plays in the series, left to what Michael Corder calls 'individual editors' improvisations', fell prey to what must be diagnosed as inconsistency rather than eclecticism, particularly in that very area of performance analysis that had initially been such an

exciting prospect. As Corder says, Arden and other editions had instigated this ‘revolution’ in editorial practice with ‘little systematic discussion of how these promises [could] best be fulfilled’.¹ Five pages on musical and operatic versions of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* seemed too much in H.R. Woudhuysen’s 1998 edition of the play, but were exceeded in Giorgio Melchiori’s introduction to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 2000. The more traditional areas of scholarly attention were sometimes no better served. In Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor’s 2006 edition of *Hamlet*, even readers with a reasonable knowledge of the play’s textual history were subjected to a boring — and frequently baffling — account of matters perhaps best addressed in the pages of an academic journal. It had become very unclear what the target audience of the Arden Shakespeare was meant to be.

How, then, is Arden 3 faring after a dozen years? I am happy to report that both *Twelfth Night* and *Timon of Athens* restore the series to something of its former quality. Both editions achieve an appropriate balance between scholarly authority and readability while covering the range of issues demanded by Arden’s governing principles, from textual minutiae to cultural contextualisation, along with the plays’ critical and theatrical receptions and their thematic and linguistic qualities. Appropriately, *Timon* is a collaborative edition of a collaborative play, but so smoothly is it put together that one would be hard-pressed to identify the contributions of each editor. If it is more successful than *Twelfth Night*, this is partly because the over-familiarity of Shakespeare’s festive comedy has virtually exhausted its potential for further elucidation — a problem with which its editor, Keir Elam, engages from the outset.

Elam is fully aware of ‘the danger of making fools of ourselves through interpretation’ (11), and offers an entertaining account of the play’s riddles and interpretative quagmires before launching into a comprehensive survey of a vast array of critical commentary. Presenting his own slant on the plethora of critical analyses generated by the play’s iconography, imagery, and intertextuality, he is wryly aware that he risks merely ‘interpreting interpretations’ (24). This does not prevent him from offering new insights on the play which reignited my own jaded response to it; he is particularly engaging on the importance of clothing and material (42–50) and on what he calls the play’s ‘major activity’: ‘the reading or misreading of the body, turning it into a kind of text’ (51).

A good edition of Shakespeare should surely stimulate disagreement, and this one certainly achieves that aim. Elam’s distinction between ‘seasonal’ productions of the play, where the stage setting prioritises the time of year, and

those which are 'Illyrian', where the focus is on location ('What [kind of] country, friends, is this?'), may help him to organise his survey of performances but proves to be entirely artificial. Ian Judge's 1994 RSC production was indeed 'overtly Christmassy' (108), but was equally determined by its location in a recognisably Elizabethan Stratford. Occasionally, Elam needs to elucidate further; if Ellen Terry had to play Viola 'sitting down', then how could she demonstrate a 'mannish walk' (143)?

Elsewhere, quibbles abound. Does it matter, for example, that the challenge of achieving a convincing likeness between Viola and Sebastian 'has more often been failed than met' (92)? Perhaps, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, the audience needs to be able to recognise which twin is which even when the other characters do not. The text and commentary, too, arouse their fair share of raised eyebrows. Surely Shakespeare does not mean Sir Toby's self-diagnosis of 'pickle herring' (1.5.117) as the cause of his belching to be taken literally, but as an excuse — otherwise the joke is lost. And does 'I smell a device' (2.3.157) really mean 'I suspect a trick'? More importantly, perhaps, misogynistic commonplaces are often passed on without comment, as when 'the manners of my mother' (2.1.37) is simply glossed as a 'womanish readiness to weep'.

The editors of *Timon* inevitably have different priorities, addressing questions of authorship, collaboration, and genre as well as assessing the reasons for the play's low critical estimation and its theatrical neglect. Their enthusiasm for the play is winning and makes one eager for the opportunity to see it again on stage. In the meantime, how refreshing it is to find them, at the very end of their introduction, stating that 'Reading a play is a theatrical enterprise' and hoping that their edition 'will stimulate readers to imagine their own performances' (151).

Taking as their implicit starting-point the hypothesis that *Timon* 'is both co-authored and unfinished' (10n), Dawson and Minton are not afraid to speculate about the whys and wherefores of collaboration. Though they are happy to leave some parts of the text unattributed, they nevertheless assert with confidence that 'Shakespeare took the meatiest scenes for himself' (5); although they argue for a very close working relationship between the dramatists, it becomes clear that the play's 'oddities and discrepancies' (8) and the 'ineluctably mixed nature of its form' (27) are the inevitable result of the two men's strikingly different sensibilities. Most interestingly, they offer a section of close analysis and comparison of speeches by Middleton and Shakespeare (90–3). While the fact of dual authorship may demand this approach, such close textual scrutiny would be welcome in other Ardens.

The introduction to this edition is nothing if not eclectic. Dutifully, the editors present a range of interpretations running the gamut of critical theory. Despite the thrust of their argument that Timon's character is essentially allegorical, they offer a plausible psychoanalytical reading based on Melanie Klein and others (51–4); and for once a Marxist approach (71–82) reaps dividends not merely on account of Marx's interest in the play but in the context of the economic anxieties of our own times. Eclecticism overreaches itself, however, in the section on 'The Afterlife of Genre' (38–43), which skims through various creative responses to the play's generic ambiguities in the fields of drama, music, opera, art, and literature from Wyndham Lewis to Duke Ellington, with Melville, Nabokov, and Stephen Oliver thrown in for good measure. I'm not entirely sure the Arden *Timon* is the right place for this kind of discussion. The editors offer, however, a comprehensive and fascinating section on the play's theatrical history (109–45), supplemented by a useful chart of notable productions (427–32) that is greatly superior to the mere chronological listing in *Twelfth Night* (146–53). Perhaps future Arden editors could adopt this feature — though it is a great pity for texts as iconic as the Ardens that any stage history is out of date the instant it is published.

Only occasionally did I find myself questioning the *Timon* editors' judgment. I have clearly been remiss in never having noticed 'Shakespeare's well-known dislike of dogs' (57); and I do not see why setting the play in Athens 'is no longer an option' (117). I was particularly disappointed to find the editors so often taking issue with John Jowett, whose work on this play in many contexts over many years must leave all who follow him immeasurably in his debt. He is not, of course, infallible, but sometimes it seems that to dismiss the ideas of one's fellow-scholars is *de rigueur* in academic circles.

As I remarked at the outset, infallibility once seemed to be one of Arden's unique selling points. It was a shock, therefore, to find *Twelfth Night* so prone to errors both typographical and factual. I shall quickly pass over the four misprints, one of them disastrous for newcomers to Arden 3, in the General Editors' Preface (xiii–xvii), since they are all properly corrected in *Timon*. Why, though, must academic writers persistently misspell the names of theatre practitioners? Here, one of the usual suspects, Antony (instead of Anthony) Sher, suffers, as does Felicity Kendal, with the designer Bunny Christie rendered as Bunnie Christy. More worryingly, there are some disconcerting misquotations and blatant errors. It may be trivial to have omitted an indefinite article from the phrase quoted from *As You Like It* on page 67 (it

should be a 'swashing and *a* martial outside'), but for Elam to misquote his own text — 'maiden's weeds' instead of 'maiden weeds' (68) — and to state that it is Malvolio, instead of Sir Andrew, that has 'sailed into the north of my lady's opinion' (73) are unforgivable lapses. In talking about Aguecheek, Elam persistently mixes up Barrie Ingham's bagpipe-toting clown of 1969 with David Warner's incarnation of the role in 1966 (133–4; also 151, 250n). Inexplicably, after stating that Viola and Olivia are 'virtual anagrams' (true) he adds that Malvolio 'contains both' names (no, it doesn't) (25). If Elam was nodding at these moments, his proof-readers should not have done so.

Timon of Athens is less prone to error, as far as I could judge. The theatre critic Kate Bassett becomes Basset (138n), and Alcibiades was not presented as Che Guevara in 1991 at Stratford-upon-Avon but (presumably) at Stratford Ontario (62n). The editors' main weakness, though, lies in frequently failing to note in the commentary where the metre demands stress on an unexpected syllable ('record', 1.1.5; 'demonstrate', 1.1.93; 'perfumes', 4.3.206), or where an -ed ending 'should be given syllabic value contrary to modern usage' (xiv) ('prized', 1.1.175; 'thanked', 1.1.250; 'waxed', 3.4.11). These matters may seem trivial, but this is the Arden Shakespeare.

The editors' style, too, sometimes falters in both editions. Elam is generally lucid, and his account of rhetoric and semiotics (78–87) remains clear even to a non-specialist. He occasionally falls prey to jargon ('a secret or encoded transcendental signified waiting to be revealed' [24]), but often counters this with jarring modern colloquialisms: 'the right to party' (20) or 'ontological clout' (367). Dawson and Minton are similarly inconsistent. To use the adjective 'deictic' twice in two pages without explaining it (95, 96) is as off-putting as the occasional plunges into patronising chattiness: 'his mate Hortensius agrees' (68); 'Pryce excels at the sardonic bits' (135); 'Compositor E (as the anonymous fellow is known)' (412). Such matters are important, revealing a lingering uncertainty about the target readership for these volumes.

Timon's editors do, however, tackle this issue head on. For the first time in my experience, they provide a section that attempts to demystify the textual notes, admitting that these are 'rather cryptic and hard to make out for the non-specialist' (147). Without any sense of condescension, they explain the principles behind these notes, using a selection of well-chosen examples. Though this section is presumably intended for undergraduates and more general readers, there must surely be some graduate students who will breathe a sigh of relief on seeing these arcane matters finally explained with so little

fuss; subsequent Arden editors take note. *Timon of Athens* is the better of these two editions partly because of the consideration for its readers that the editors demonstrate both here and throughout the volume.

PETER MALIN

Notes

- 1 Michael Cordner, “‘Are We Being Theatrical Yet?’: Actors, Editors, and the Possibilities of Dialogue”, *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen (eds), (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 399–414, 399.

Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster. *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp x, 266.

Consider the following quotations: ‘Once disguise playfully dissociates any unitary cast of character, the closure of representation in the characterization of given standards of worthiness itself is ruptured’ and ‘Shakespeare would explore the actor’s grappling with cross-dressed disguise in several comedies’. The latter quotation is comprehensible but tells us nothing we don’t already know. The former quotation, by contrast, may tell us something original or important but masks its meaning beneath a style so opaque as to render it beyond assimilation. The fact that these two quotations come from the same page (126) of *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance* only goes to show what a curate’s egg the book is. Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster have produced a volume that is by turns suggestive, exciting, bland, and infuriatingly nonsensical.

Unfortunately for readers of the volume, the latter quality is the most extensively represented and conspicuous characteristic of a prose style that relishes formulations which demand to be read three or four times — even then without always making sense: ‘A thick performative [a thick performative *what?*] is jostling side by side with representations of personal and sometimes national plight’ (5); ‘When the fat knight puts a cushion on his head,