

Celestine Woo. *Romantic Actors and Bardolatry: Performing Shakespeare from Garrick to Kean*. Studies in Shakespeare 16. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. Pp 209.

Celestine Woo's study aims to explore how four key actors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries 'broadened and altered the boundaries of Shakespearean discourse in specific ways, offering and modeling novel paradigms by which to apprehend Shakespeare, and thus contributing to the growth of bardolatry as a discursive phenomenon'. The book consists of four chapters, each of which constitutes a case study of a notable performer: David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and Edmund Kean. Twenty years after the important scholarly moment which gave rise to works such as Michael Dobson's landmark study *The Making of the National Poet* (Oxford University Press, 1992), eighteenth-century bardolatry is again the subject of significant critical attention which frequently professes to focus on the role of the stage in establishing the bard's important cultural status. Woo's work forms part of this trend, complementing recent studies such as Reiko Oya's *Representing Shakespearean Tragedy: Garrick, the Kembles, and Kean* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Vanessa Cunningham's *Shakespeare and Garrick* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). As in those works, despite their actor-focused titles, the emphasis in this study is less on theatre history than literary and cultural context; the introduction explicitly positions this work as a contribution to Romantic studies rather than stage history per se.

The inclusion of Garrick in this volume might therefore strike the reader as odd but the author is at pains to account for this, citing critics such as Allardyce Nicoll, Joseph Donohue, and Jonathan Bate who have seen Garrick as part of a school of acting extending to Kemble, Siddons, and Kean which focused on the imaginative and emotional experience of the individual character and was moreover inherently reactive and reflective. Woo seems on shakier ground in studying Garrick than she does in her exploration of the later performers; in fact this chapter contains several minor errors (for example, Woo seems unaware that Macklin's Scottish-dress *Macbeth* dates from 1773, towards the end of Garrick's career, and is therefore unlikely to have directly affected Garrick's experiments with costume, although she is correct to say that Macklin was an important influence on the younger actor). The cumulative effect of such errors is to weaken the authority of her argument about Garrick, which also fails to take account of Heather McPherson's important recent essay 'Garrickomania: Art, Celebrity and the

Imaging of Garrick' (written for the online portion of the Folger Shakespeare Library's exhibition on Garrick held in 2005), which explores how Garrick deliberately conflated his image with Shakespeare's, commodifying both, to powerful effect. McPherson's work is also notable for taking this element of Garrick's career seriously, an aim that Woo shares in her assertion that we should recognize him as 'shrewder than the slightly absurd, self-aggrandizing actor, brilliant but a tad embarrassing, that he has been wont to appear within scholarship'.

Like Garrick, Kemble was able to use his position as manager of one of London's patent theatres (Drury Lane then later Covent Garden) to shape the stage presentation of Shakespeare in important ways, notably through his use of pageantry and spectacle. Woo does not pursue this comparison between the two figures but her focus on Kemble's work as an actor-manager (a role which encompasses many of the functions today undertaken by a director) justifies his inclusion in this study, despite the fact that his acting was less obviously 'Romantic' than the other performers dealt with here. This chapter considers how Kemble constructed Shakespeare as 'a nationalized and politicized archetype, an aesthetic and moral repository of Englishness'. Woo draws on other criticism throughout, notably the work of Bate and Gillian Russell, to consider the role of Shakespeare in the politicization of the stage during the French Revolution and his place in the Old Price Riots of 1809, providing a thorough exploration of Kemble's fashioning of the bard to serve powerful social purposes.

In her treatment of Siddons, Woo argues that the actress linked gender issues 'with the very notion of Shakespeare himself' with the result that Shakespeare's genius and authority grew to encompass women's concerns. The gendering of Shakespeare in fact stretches back through the actresses and critics of the Garrick era as far as the seventeenth century, where we find Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn identifying a link between women and the bard. The contribution that Siddons made to this discourse is nevertheless highly significant and worthy of exploration. Woo focuses in particular on Siddons's 'Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth', in which she attempts to empathize with Shakespeare's most notorious heroine, and her daring cross-dressed performances of Hamlet (the latter, we are told, is treated in greater detail in a separate article and consideration of it here is somewhat limited). Siddons's innovative performances of Shakespeare's characters were emotionally powerful but always grounded in careful study and this chapter makes the strongest

argument (set out by Woo in her introduction, building on the work of Jonathan Holmes) that the actor should also be considered a scholar.

The chapter on Kean seems to me the most interesting in the volume as it posits this performer as the very embodiment of both 'Romantic acting' as the author understands it (see above) and the Romantic attitude to theatre itself. Here Woo reconsiders (although less radically than Tracy C. Davis has done) Coleridge's famous quip that seeing Kean act was 'like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning', suggesting that critics' emphasis on Kean's rendering of 'moments of deep and/or intense emotion powerfully and successfully conveyed' became a way not of excusing Kean's erraticism but of defining the success of his technique. By encouraging the spectator to flesh out the details between these 'points', Kean's acting embodied the desire of Romantic theorists such as Charles Lamb that the theatre remain an imaginative experience. Woo acknowledges that her perspective is complementary to that of Thomas C. Crochunis on this point but her account of Kean's acting nevertheless contributes to the growing movement to challenge the characterisation of Romanticism as inherently antitheatrical, a critical position set out in Jane Moody's influential article "Fine Word, Legitimate!": Towards a Theatrical History of Romanticism' (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38 [1996]). Most significantly, Woo demonstrates how Romantic criticism was fundamentally influenced by the stage presentation of Shakespeare.

The book attempts to explore bardolatry in the context of Bourdieu's theories of cultural production, arguing that the performers it considers 'increased the number of available positions within the cultural field of Shakespearean discourse: that is, they expanded the tools with which to apprehend Shakespearean meanings'. Thus Garrick 'commodifies' Shakespeare, Kemble 'consecrates' him, Siddons adds the 'position' of gender, and Kean is explored in terms of his 'scriptability'. This contextualization seems to me to serve more as an organizing principle than a methodological framework for the book. However, while the book's division into four case studies is clear, the argument within each chapter sometimes wanders. Woo asserts that Bourdieu's lens allows her 'to describe fairly concretely what would otherwise be abstract and amorphous: the evolution and development of a discourse and the contributions and consequences of one theatrical career'. A conclusion, sadly lacking here, would help solidify the relevance of this methodology and allow the author to draw some final comparisons between the several theatrical careers of her study.

While some might take issue with Woo's focus on a small number of star performers in a collaborative art form such as theatre and a cultural process such as bardolatry that necessarily relied on a large number of figures and social forces, this book contributes to the growing scholarly interest in theatre and celebrity exemplified by the essay collection *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, edited by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Woo's work illuminates the role of Shakespeare in the careers of the actors she considers and explores how they deliberately or inadvertently (and ironically, Woo argues in the case of Kean) made use of the figure of the bard to further their own professional ends. In addition to the compelling claim for the status of the actor as scholar, this work's emphasis on what Woo terms the actors' 'characterology' is particularly noteworthy as it not only puts character development at the centre of the actor's art but also contributes to the re-evaluation of character criticism called for by the recent volume of essays *Reading Shakespeare's Characters*, edited by Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). While it privileges Shakespearean tragedy over comedy, the book uses an impressive range of sources to explore the careers of these performers, including archival material on Kean held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. *Romantic Actors and Bardolatry* explores what Shakespeare meant to four key performers and also contributes to our understanding of how their stage presentation of Shakespeare influenced Romantic literary culture.

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