

Barbara Ravelhofer (ed). *James Shirley and Early Modern Theatre: New Critical Perspectives*. *Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama Series*. London: Routledge, 2017. Pp xiv, 233. Hardback £90.00. ISBN: 9781472480361.

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James Shirley sits on the margins of the early modern dramatic canon. As the writer of some thirty plays, all of which are extant, he enjoyed relative prominence during his own lifetime and earned praise from contemporaries John Ford and Phillip Massinger as well as Queen Henrietta Maria. His literary reputation suffered, however, at the hands of such literary giants as John Dryden, Algenon Charles Swinburne, and T.S. Eliot. Dryden, in particular, seems to have established the trend of deriding Shirley's literary talent, and that assumption remained more or less unchallenged until relatively recently (1–2). Even though Shirley's works have seen a revival since the 1970s, they are seldom the subjects of critical articles, standalone editions, or book-length studies. Shirley has remained, in Jeremy Lopez's pithy summation, the 'invisible man of the early modern dramatic canon' (17). The present collection of essays, *James Shirley and the Early Modern Theatre: New Critical Perspectives*, seeks to rectify this lack, making a case for a Shirley turn in scholarship. The book's polemic, as editor Barbara Ravelhofer establishes in her introduction, centres on rescuing Shirley from the critical dustbin. Although the latter half of the twentieth century offered a minor revival of Shirley criticism and standalone editions of his plays, this volume offers the first book-length critical study of Shirley since 1988 (2). Offering an impressive breadth of essays, the twelve chapters in this collection prove on the whole that the works of Shirley are a fruitful and exciting place for academic inquiry.

Lopez's thoughtful chapter 'Time for James Shirley' opens the collection by asking the 'why Shirley?' question through an analysis of Shirley's 'invisibility', that is, invisibility in both the way Shirley positioned himself as a playwright and within the early modern dramatic canon as it currently stands. Shirley, he argues, was a poet of his time in that he was 'very contemporary, fully defined by the social and political world of Caroline England', yet also 'very old-fashioned, nostalgically recycling the conventions of antecedent drama' (17). Lopez finds in Shirley a poet self-conscious about the ways his plays engage the dramatic norms of his day, yet whose particular stylistic innovations are difficult to pin down, a trait perhaps off-putting for would-be readers of his plays. Several essays in this

collection work to unpack the nature of Shirley's artistry through his engagement with generic commonplaces of the Caroline theatrical moment. In 'The Comic and the Apocalyptic in Shirley's Drama', Rebecca Hasler finds an 'apoci-comic structural form' in his comedies which complicates marriage as a resolution to comedies (33). This comedic form, grounded in Shirley's awareness of Caroline political-apocalyptic discourse, instead mirrors apocalyptic narratives like the one found in the Book of Revelation. Like Hasler, Ravelhofer finds innovation in Shirley's engagement with genre. In her piece 'Shirley's Tragedies', one of the volume's highlights, she unpacks Shirley's 'vision of tragedy' in his five forays into that genre: *The Maid's Revenge*, *Love's Cruelty*, *The Traitor*, *The Politician*, and *The Cardinal* (86). Also like Hasler, she finds more than meets the eye. His underrated style, she contends, is 'quietly assertive rather than glaringly provocative', ideal for the indoor spaces in which his plays were performed (103). Ravelhofer's analysis of Shirley's tragedies draws attention to a tension in Shirley studies that several essays acknowledge: Shirley's position as a Caroline dramatist means that study of his work repeatedly sees him as derivative of or dependent on his better-studied predecessors. 'As long as theories of tragedy demand that a writer must take the hammer to the canon to deserve critical accolade', she argues, 'Shirley — and with him, many other Caroline tragedians — will not obtain the acknowledgement due to their artistic achievement' (103). Lopez's characterization of Shirley as 'invisible' indeed seems apt.

The essays in this collection also allude to several trends in Shirley's writing, particularly his aptitude for constructing pointed political messages in his plays. As Rebecca A. Bailey puts it in her absorbing chapter on Shirley's maritime plays *The Young Admiral* and *The Court Secret*, 'the compelling power of Shirley's texts' lies in his ability to 'navigate and dissect the most pressing anxieties within society, whilst deepening our understanding of the vitality of pre-Civil War theatre' (72). Rachel Ellen Clark's chapter, 'Rebellion in Arcadia: Caroline Anti-militarism in Dramatic Adaptations of Sidney' centers on a close-reading of Shirley's obscure play *A Pastorall Called the Arcadia*, and demonstrates the ways it engages with Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* as a source text, but subverts Sidney's assumption of militarism. Both Bailey and Clark, along with Peter Happé in his study of Shirley's representation of the court in his plays, suggest political vibrancy in Shirley's plays. Bailey attributes to Shirley a deft understanding of the values of the court from which he sought patronage, particularly in his use of neoplatonism and naval themes in *The Young Admiral* and *The Court Secret*. What emerges from these chapters is an evolving picture of Shirley's relationship to the court, and each of these essays finds complexity and reflexivity in Shirley's engagement

with his political landscape. Happé's biographical turn also nicely complements Robert I. Lublin's fascinating piece, 'Shirley's Dublin Days: A Nervous Premiere of *St Patrick for Ireland*', which follows Shirley's failed attempt to help establish a professional theatre culture in Dublin.

The chapters comprising the final third of the book mostly move away from Shirley's biography and his politics. Daniel Starza Smith's 'Papers Most Foul: The Melbourne Manuscript and the "Foul Papers" Debate' uses an examination of a possible fragment of Shirley's *The Traitor* to expand our working definitions of 'foul papers'. This textual study pairs nicely with Jitka Štollová's 'Plotting Parataxis in Shirley's *The Politician*', which looks to Shirley's expansive character lists in Interregnum-era printed editions of his plays for information about characterization and authorial design. Her positioning of character lists as paratexts offers an intriguing lens through which to think about Shirley's works, especially after the closure of the theatres in 1642. These chapters, along with Philip West's analysis of Shirley's surviving lyric poetry in 'The Drama of Shirley's Poems', unpack elements of Shirley's work specific to the material written forms that the work takes, alluding to the interplays between Shirley's written and spoken works. This theme, indeed, extends to the final two chapters in the volume, Andrew Ashbee's 'Music in the Work of James Shirley' and Marina Tarlinkskaja's 'Versification from Shakespeare to Shirley: Implications for Performance', the latter of which closes out this diverse collection with a close analysis of Shirley's versification. The former surveys the music in Shirley's plays, finding in him an 'innovative predecessor' to Henry Purcell and John Dryden (188), another area in which Shirley's innovation is 'invisible' in comparison to better-studied artists. As these five chapters demonstrate, the possibilities for Shirley scholarship are expansive and full of possibilities for further studies.

Occasionally the essays in the volume feel burdened by plot summary. This fact, however, betrays one of the collection's assumptions: namely that Shirley's works, along with many of his Caroline contemporaries, have been largely ignored, and thus the bulk of his work is still relatively obscure even to scholars of early modern drama. This collection challenges that assumption by asking readers to consider the possibilities of offering the Shirley canon a more prominent place in scholarship, performance, and pedagogy. Indeed, one of the greatest successes of this collection is its enthusiasm for Shirley's artistry. Ravelhofer sees in his art a 'delight in luxury and beauty' accompanied by 'a knowledge of the efforts it takes to create something beautiful, and a sense that such effort did not always bring the hoped-for recognition' (12). Let us hope that we are wise enough now to see what we have been missing.

