

**Tom Rutter. *Shakespeare and the Admiral's Men: Reading Across Repertories on the London Stage, 1594–1600*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp 226. Hardback USD \$82.97. ISBN: 9781107077430.**

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In *Shakespeare and the Admiral's Men: Reading Across Repertories on the London Stage, 1594–1600*, Tom Rutter identifies several years at the end of the sixteenth century as a discrete period that can yield insights into the theatrical culture in which Shakespeare and the dramatists belonging to the Admiral's Men participated. Making the playing companies and their repertories the object of his inquiry, Rutter notes that in 1594 Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and in 1600 the Admiral's Men moved to the Fortune playhouse. Within these limits, Rutter's topic is 'reciprocal influence' (1), that is, how Shakespeare influenced and was influenced by the work of others.

Among the book's accomplishments, the one that stands out above the rest is the extent to which Rutter succeeds in embedding Shakespeare in the theatrical culture of his time. Rutter makes Shakespeare one with other dramatists, highlighting how he learned from them, copied them, and wrote plays that they, in turn, copied and studied. In the process, Rutter also elevates by association the work of the Admiral's Men's dramatists, giving their plays more detailed attention than many other studies and crediting them with providing models for some of Shakespeare's work. Rutter displays deep knowledge of the plays he discusses and of the scholarship that precedes him. His book, lucid and economical in style, introduces new perspectives on the plays and lays out numerous intertextual connections. The book will have a long shelf life as required reading for students and scholars of Renaissance drama.

Early in *Shakespeare and the Admiral's Men*, Rutter insists that writers such as George Chapman, William Haughton, and Anthony Munday must be considered as Shakespeare's 'competitors and fellow innovators' (2). In that most concise and humble of phrases, 'men like these', Rutter delivers his biggest punch, one that almost instantly immerses Shakespeare in the theatrical business of the day. Later, in discussion of plays by Chapman, Haughton, and Henry Porter, Rutter notes the regularity and knowing expertise with which Admiral's Men's plays quoted, alluded to, or parodied the works of Shakespeare, especially *Romeo and Juliet*:

Admiral's Men dramatists not only knew Shakespeare's work, they expected their audience to as well. Playgoers who went to the Rose must also have attended the Theatre ... playgoers who went to the Theatre must also have attended the Rose ... the evidence for the two companies drawing on the same body of playgoers is stronger than that for them appealing to different groups. (162).

The notion of two companies drawing on the same body of playgoers is one of the building blocks for Rutter's ultimate conclusion: the Admiral's Men did not have an identifiable company style (201).

Rutter organizes the book into five chapters, each featuring one Shakespeare play and usually three or more plays by Admiral's Men's dramatists. The five Shakespeare plays include *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It*.

For *The Merchant of Venice*, Rutter moves away from the prose narratives that other critics traditionally cite as sources for the play and looks instead to plays: *The Jew at Malta* of course, but then especially *A Knack to Know an Honest Man*. Rutter's method of assigning influence is to identify plot elements that repeat from one play to the other. He finds in both *Merchant* and *Knack* the 'faithful friends' plot, the 'usurer's daughter' plot, and a long courtroom scene. Other elements suggest deeper affinities: themes of justice and mercy, disinterested friendships, and a sense of the miraculous, all of which suggest to Rutter 'a way of responding to Marlowe's [*The Jew at Malta*]' (49). Rutter's close reading suggests how features of plays rarely discussed in relation to Shakespeare can emerge as illuminating characteristics of 1590s drama.

For *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Rutter first builds on the work of Meredith Skura, who has described *Dream's* numerous structural and formulaic borrowings from *Dido*, *Queen of Carthage*, *Tamburlaine*, and *Dr Faustus*, the latter of which Henslowe records as having enjoyed twenty performances by July 1596. Also significant for characterizing *Dream* is *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, which puts forward a comic plot set in pre-Reformation rural England and which, unlike *Dr Faustus*, does not require damnation for the magician. Problems with date aside, *John a Kent and John a Cumber* is the play that strikes Rutter as the closest 'to Shakespeare's magician play of the mid-1590s, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' (87). Rutter emphasizes *John a Kent's* pre-Reformation setting and use of magic that does not require damnation, as well as references to and enactments of medieval religious practices, including a morris dance. For *Dream*, Rutter's list is similar, although he adds mumming and May games 'that, while undeniably still in existence in sixteenth-century England, were embattled due to being "perceived as

idolatrous Catholic practices” (93). Rutter also identifies brief moments where *John a Kent* and *Dream* use language and action that had occurred in *Faustus*. Documenting this cross-play of allusiveness here and throughout *Shakespeare and the Admiral’s Men* is another of Rutter’s central achievements.

In chapter 5, Rutter takes up the challenging group of *Oldcastle* and *Huntingdon* plays, along with *As You Like It*. Rutter’s contribution to the *Oldcastle* discussion lies in his emphasis on the play’s representation of the issue of treason, which in this period meant disloyalty to the monarch. When Sir Roger Acton claims that his conscience led him to join the rebellion, King Harry replies, ‘Then thy conscience is corrupt, / For in thy conscience thou are bound to us’ (177). Such a statement was relevant not only to Protestants, but to Catholics as well. For a Catholic in sixteenth-century England, a statement of loyalty to the monarch provided the clearest means to declare non-recognition of papal power. The most serious articulation of that position would come in 1606 with the establishment of the Oath of Allegiance, enacted in King James’s first parliament. The Oath required Catholics to swear allegiance to the king as their temporal ruler and to swear that the pope did not possess the power either to depose temporal rulers or to absolve an English subject of his oath of allegiance.<sup>1</sup> As I suggested in *Anthony Munday and the Catholics*, ‘Munday’s typical manoeuvre, the one that provokes readers into thinking he was a “rabid” Protestant, was to bracket his work with statements of government policy and loyalty. In fact, an ardent expression of loyalty exists as a hallmark of Munday’s writing for the duration of his career.’<sup>2</sup> Rutter perhaps misses an opportunity to broaden the play’s representation of loyalties when he does not discuss the play’s final scene where all the characters, in a riot of mistaken identity, find themselves dressed in another’s clothing. As with the changes in religion that were accompanied by changing rules for conformity, here anyone can suddenly find himself or herself looking like someone else — even like a puritan or a Catholic.

Rutter makes the presence of such openness a hallmark of his readings of the *Huntingdon* plays and of *As You Like It*, in all of which he sees the motif of exile to be as relevant to Protestants as to Catholics. Discussed together, these plays provide a rich and evocative addition to the closing pages of this excellent book. Rutter does an especially impressive job of showing how meaningfully the details of *As You Like It* evoke both Protestant and Catholic registers, suggesting a ‘strategy of conscious ambivalence on Shakespeare’s part’ (195), and one he finds in evidence also in the plays of the Admiral’s Men.

Elsewhere in the book, Rutter uses a discussion of George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* to provide a productive supplement to reconsideration of Shakespeare’s

secular and skeptical handling of historical materials in *1 Henry IV*. Identifying Hotspur as closest in conception to Peele's ironic depiction of Sebastian and others in *Alcazar*, Rutter classifies these characters as subject to 'an ethic of individual heroism that is simply deluded' (112). He closes the chapter with discussion of the 'common engagement with certain contemporary developments' (127), naming both the Nine Years' War (1594–1603) in Ireland and the exploits of Essex. Decisive yet undogmatic in such identifications, Rutter provides an overview of how different critics have interpreted such allusiveness.

Throughout *Shakespeare and the Admiral's Men*, Rutter maintains an even-handed, interpretatively conservative, and focused approach aimed at achieving agreement with his main thesis, one that is also stated with welcome care in the book's final sentence: 'while a repertory-based approach may encourage the identification of a company style, perhaps the best response to the varied, innovative and ideologically unfixed drama of the Admiral's Men between 1594 and 1600, open to the influence of Shakespeare while shaping his own dramatic development, is to refrain from doing so' (201).

## Notes

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- 1 See Michael C. Questier, 'Loyalty, Religion and State Power in Early Modern England: English Romanism and the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance', *Historical Journal* 40 (1997), 311–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x97007176>.
- 2 Donna B. Hamilton, *Anthony Munday and the Catholics, 1560–1633* (Aldershot, 2005), xvii.