

Editorial

The late twentieth century saw a move towards the study of Shakespeare as part of a popular theatrical tradition. Robert Weimann's pioneering book *Shakespeare und die Tradition des Volkstheaters* was published in Germany in 1967, but it did not reach a wider audience until 1978 when it was translated into English. Weimann's book constituted an authoritative appeal for a reconsideration of Shakespeare's theatrical works in historical terms: in particular, for a study of their function in the historical and cultural context that produced them rather than as matter solely of interest to the literary critic. The tension which the study of Shakespeare's works involves between literary criticism and historical interpretation or, as Weimann says, between continuity and survival and discontinuity and historicization is clearly expressed in a passage of the book's Introduction:

On the one hand, Shakespeare's theater is irremediably a thing of the past; on the other, his plays have survived the conditions from which they originated and are continually revitalized on the modern stage ... The tension between what is past and what lives for us today is obvious; and yet, from the point of view of the function of literary scholarship, it seems impossible to relegate the pastness of Shakespeare's theater to the 'pure' historian and its contemporaneity to the 'pure' critic or modern producer. (1978, xiii)

The pioneering character of Weimann's book was not only in his assertion of the necessity to re-read and interrogate Shakespeare's theatrical works in a historical perspective and, more generally, to re-read theatre as a cultural institution in history (those were the years of a different, 'new', kind of historicism); but also in the fact that it opened up a new and extremely promising field for Shakespearean studies: that of an inquiry into the many ways in which Shakespeare's plays demonstrate their engagement with early modern popular culture and also the ways in which the popular tradition is present in his works.

The same year in which Weimann's book was translated, Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* appeared and was similarly recognized as a pioneering work. Crucially, Burke raised fundamental issues concerning the very meaning of 'popular' in connection with 'culture' and on the relationship between 'popular' and 'elite' cultures in early modern European cultural formations. Both Weimann and Burke had a deep influence on later work, especially in the English-speaking world, although, in the case of Burke's book, the impact was considerably more general owing to the scope of the issues which it developed. Yet, it could be said that their respective influences have remained discrete: following Weimann, there has been work on early modern English theatre as a 'popular' experience; while social historians responded

to the theoretical issues developed by Burke, expanding his suggestions or analysing particular contexts.

A further influence, even more ample than Weimann's, on the study of the popular elements in early modern English theatre, and Shakespeare in particular, has been Mikhail Bakhtin's work and particularly his writings on carnival and the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), which has produced or encouraged insightful studies of festivities and misrule such as Michael Bristol 1985 and François Laroque 1991. But the book which probably best conjugates the until then discrete areas of interest of literary studies and socio-cultural reflection on the 'popular' was Annabel Patterson's *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (1989). At a time when the name of Shakespeare was invariably written between inverted commas and when 'texts' and their unconscious seemed to be the only attainable entities, she wrote: 'I have no difficulty in positing Shakespeare as a writer whose intentions, if never fully recoverable, are certainly worth debating' (4-5). Against any theoretical deletion of the author, Patterson posits Shakespeare as an authorial subject in history and supports her idea of a Shakespeare expressing a sympathetic stance towards 'the people' using a great number of often unfamiliar contemporary historical documents.

The 1980s studies mentioned above are all conscious of Burke's achievement and all briefly quote his book; yet, the approach remains essentially literary.

More recently, studies by literary historians reappraising the links between the theatre and 'the popular' have appeared. These studies have also kept a less than tangential eye on the achievements of social history. This is notable in a study by Mary Ellen Lamb (2006), in a book edited by Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (2006) and in several essays published in journals or as chapters of books. A recent volume edited by two early modern scholars, Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield (2009) include several essays which are interdisciplinary. In turn, some literary critics have ventured in the field of social history with books in which 'the people' are, at various levels, the protagonists (see Pugliatti 2003 and Purkiss 2006). On the other hand, a return to sealed compartments is represented by the 2007 *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, where the leading idea is that of exploring 'the ways in which Shakespeare has been consumed'; the plays' 'reinvention, adaptation, citation, and appropriation ... across a wide range of media in subsequent periods and cultures' (Shaughnessy, ed., 2007, 2, 1). The contributions in this volume have been entrusted exclusively to literary critics, whose attention is mainly focalised on the plays' afterlife. On the contrary, many 1980s collections of essays on popular culture by social historians venture into the field of literary studies, paying attention to certain 'literary' forms such as the cheap and widely diffused almanacs, ballads, beggar books, etc.; and, when discussing popular print, many social historians evoke Shakespeare's Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* or Jonson's ballad-seller in *Bartholomew Fair*.

What literary critics can learn from social historians is clear. However, it is probably true to say that social historians have been more conscious than literary critics of the potentialities implied by a closer collaboration between the two disciplines. Crucially, Christopher Hill, in his *Liberty Against the Law* (1996), deliberately based his historical inquiry into the popular voice during the seventeenth-century revolution on the reading of literary texts. Not less crucially, Burke has affirmed that ‘cultural history is not a monopoly of historians. It is multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary’; and that, in particular, ‘from literary critics, cultural historians can learn the “close reading” of texts’ (2008, 135).

The essays in this volume variously represent the work of social and cultural historians and literary critics and adopt an inclusive approach to ‘culture’ and the ‘popular’. In her introductory essay Paola Pugliatti explores variable and historically determined definitions of ‘popular culture’ with the people as either makers or consumers of culture and, in particular, argues against the ‘elision of the past’ performed in many recent studies, both historical and literary, and which has also affected the field of Shakespeare studies.

The first three essays in the collection consider the mediation of popular language. In ‘Demotic Voices and Popular Complaint in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England’, David Cressy confronts the question of the accuracy of the demotic language Elizabethans heard on the stage. Cressy’s archival investigations into court reports and depositions, for example, produce telling illustrations of popular idiom which resonate with the imagined voices of the ‘commons’ in plays of the time. In ‘Shakespeare and the Words of Early Modern Physic’, Roberta Mullini explores a neglected aspect of popular culture: medical terms used by the people rather than those handed down through university medicine. Mullini shows that glossaries were available to help with the classically derived, specialized medical lexicon and that Shakespeare draws on such vernacularization of classical texts. The premise of Ann Kaegi, ‘“What say the citizens” in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*?’ is similarly inspired by specific verbal occurrences which chime with the popular. She notes the frequency of allusions to ‘citizens’ in Shakespeare’s history, arguing that Richard speaks like a citizen to court popular favour. In emphasizing Richard’s skills as an actor, critics have underestimated the significance of the citizens in Richard’s rise enabled by his canny grasp of popular idiom, and the political significance of an emergent citizen culture.

The two essays which follow both deal with ‘popular’ custom and rituals. Nitália Pikli in ‘The Prince and the Hobby-Horse’ examines the figure of the ‘hobby-horse’, notably recalled by Hamlet as a forgotten ritual. In examining the meanings that accrued around the hobby-horse, as distinct from its role in the morris dance, Pikli sees these semantic shifts as indicative of an increasingly commercialized popular culture. In ‘Behind the Happily-Ever After’, Ciara Rawnsley explores Shakespeare’s use of the folktale, specifically in *All’s Well that Ends Well*. Rawnsley demonstrates the sustained appeal of stories,

transmitted orally and in print, in a culture in which tales were created by the people before they were commodified for the people.

Two essays in the collection focus on early modern manifestations of witchcraft. While one is written from the perspective of a social historian and the other from that of a literary scholar, both interrogate documentary and fictional sources for what light they shed on one another. James Sharpe's essay, 'In Search of the English Sabbat', argues that, contrary to common assumption, there was in England widespread belief in the witches' sabbat, popular in its origins and construction. Sharpe turns to Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's play *The Late Lancashire Witches*, as an example of a literary text which draws on depositions from the Northern Circuit Assize detailing an English sabbat. Luca Baratta also locates witchcraft in Lancashire. In 'Lancashire: a Land of Witches in Shakespeare's Time', Baratta examines the pamphlet and dramatic literature that emanated from the trial of the Pendle witches in 1612. In the pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches*, Baratta argues that fictions of witchcraft were subsumed in what purports to be an official account of the trial.

The two final essays focus on incidents which figure in poetry and tragic drama for which the social reality, particularly at the level of the popular, was very different. Donatella Pallotti details the popularity of rape narratives not only in canonical texts, but also in popular media. Examining these literary redactions in light of the contemporary legal debate, Pallotti investigates the position of rape victims who could only bring a case against their violator by producing proofs of their struggle, 'showing and telling'. In 'Buried in the Open Fields', Janet Clare details research on early modern suicide and the popular rituals practised against the self-murder. From this perspective, Clare offers a close reading of Ophelia's suicide as it is represented in the different texts of *Hamlet*, arguing that the spectrum of responses embedded in the text, from the popular to the elite, refracts the diverse social responses to self-murder in the period.

Taken as a whole, the essays published in this volume can also be read as a contribution towards erasing – or at least diminishing – the distance between the historians' readings of texts, documents and socio-cultural contexts and the 'close readings' which are the literary critics' prerogative. This approach to the issues discussed is not simply to acknowledge the obvious fact that texts live 'in history'; more significantly, it affirms the necessity of a productive exchange of values, perspectives and methods of analysis. This volume shows that such a syncretism is not only possible but also fruitful.

It is by now a habit, if not yet a tradition, that the volumes of *JEMS* be supplemented by an Appendix which presents texts belonging to different genres, different epochs and different national cultures, in which the topic of each volume is discussed, illustrated or represented. In this issue, popular culture is seen through the eyes of historians, theoreticians, anthropologists, theologians, but also through the eyes of poets, novel-writers and playwrights.

As ever, we wish to thank Arianna Antonielli and the students of the wonderful editorial team who, from the start, have made the publication of *JEMS* possible; John Denton, once more unfailingly efficient and efficacious; and Carmelina Imbroscio who helped in decoding some medieval and early modern French texts which appear in the Appendix.

Not least, we wish to thank the colleagues who joined our seminar on 'Shakespeare and Early Modern Popular Culture' which took place at the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress in Prague in July, 2011, and from which the idea of this volume was born, and also the colleagues who later joined the project responding to our call for papers. The texts they have prepared for *JEMS* show that the relationship between Shakespeare and the popular culture of his time is an issue worth considering.

Janet Clare and Paola Pugliatti

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