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BOOK REVIEW

Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 321 pp. £35.00. ISBN 978-0198777748 (hb).

‘The argument of this book is simply stated: it is that Shakespeare’s plays were frequently and specifically revised for presentation at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I. And that the texts which have come down to us often bear the marks of these revisions’ (1). This conclusion was in part prompted by the lengths of some of the texts of Shakespeare’s plays, lengths that would have precluded their being performed in full on public stages. On the other hand, Dutton points out, there is documentary evidence that some court performances of plays (for example, ones for special occasions such as the opening of the Revels season), involved works that went on for much longer than those performed at indoor or outdoor public venues. Dutton argues that as Shakespeare was the resident poet of his company, when longer plays were required by the Master of the Revels he adapted one of his own scripts for a courtly milieu.

Given Dutton’s publishing history it would not be surprising if he had unearthed or reassessed a document related to the nuts and bolts of the business of the playhouse that provided direct evidence for his thesis. However, he is explicit that this is not the case. What he is presenting is a scenario that is a best fit with the known facts. The outline of these facts makes up the first part of the book. As he hopes that his audience will include non-specialists, he explains everything from the beginning, and accounts of such things as foul papers and memorial reconstruction are provided. It is not entirely clear who these non-specialists might be, but catering for them has not resulted in pages of material that might merely annoy readers who are familiar with such things. Going back to first principles has also allowed Dutton to articulate his position vis-à-vis a large number of controversial areas in Shakespeare scholarship, and, as his overall thesis draws evidence from fitting very many things together, I found this approach useful rather than distracting. It also provides a framework which requires thoroughness. For example, I would have accepted a bare assertion of the problem of the apparently ‘long’ plays, but Dutton’s working method requires him to demonstrate that there is in fact such a problem, and although this is the majority opinion, he does not take this for granted, going through the evidence for performance lengths, the time it takes to deliver a certain number of lines etc. in an efficient fashion. This manner of proceeding is appropriate to a book that intends to be a landmark contribution to Shakespeare scholarship.

The existence of Shakespearean playtexts that are too long for performance poses a problem of economy. Why would a busy writer-actor-sharer waste time producing pages of work that would never be used and which, because of his experience, he knew would never be used? One answer to this has been provided by Lukas Erne in *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003): Shakespeare produced the longer texts for readers, not playgoers.

Dutton engages repeatedly with this possibility which he explicitly rejects as he everywhere emphasises treatments of dramatic texts in terms of the stage. Court performance has not received enough attention, he points out, perhaps because it was relatively rare and contributed comparatively little to a company's income. Against this, he stresses that Shakespeare's companies owed their existences to court patronage so that substantially rewriting a play for one performance was a sound investment of resources that ensured continued licence in public theatres. In doing so, Dutton provides an overview of early-modern revisions of plays and the changing role of the Master of the Revels, specifically, the investment that Edmund Tilney put into 'reforming' texts. Here, Dutton surveys such things as payments in Henslowe's *Diary* to revisers and the differing contemporary uses of descriptions such as 'augmented', 'enlarged', 'amended' and 'corrected'. He also looks at specific non-Shakespearean (e.g. *The Spanish Tragedy* and Dekker's *Old Fortunatus*) texts. This is one of several sections of Dutton's book that could be stand-alone accounts of their topics which might well be drawn on by those who reject his overall argument.

The second part of the book provides case studies for Dutton's general thesis. His treatment of *Henry V* works from the basis that the first quarto is an imperfect version of an early form of the Folio text. The latter was adapted for court presentation and thus emphasises the weight of responsibility of kingship. This example does not do justice to the sophistication of Dutton's treatment of the play, but the range of conclusions that he draws does not lend itself to summary as he treats *Henry V* at some length. Shorter subsections deal with 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the single sequence additions to *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard II* and 2 *Henry IV*. None of these are intended as complete readings of the plays, and these are not the only Shakespearean plays to which Dutton's thesis would be relevant; instead this section provides a sample of the textual and interpretative consequences of his approach.

In this volume Dutton takes a stance on hundreds of issues in Shakespeare studies and as a result there will be numerous objections to particular parts of it. Most of these need not be fatal to the book's core theory which is articulated with such thoroughness and clarity that I expect that even those who reject its lines of argument entirely will be forced to engage with them. As Dutton's own overviews of parts of the history of Shakespeare scholarship demonstrate, few orthodoxies survive for long undamaged. I will not, therefore, predict that *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* heralds a paradigm shift, but it will provide a paradigm that future publications in the area will have to address.