

## Review Article

# *'The drugs don't work': Theatre, Theory ... and After*

Simon Barker Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education

Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, Macmillan Press, 1999, pp. xvii + 203, £25 pb.; David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, Routledge, 1999, pp. 264. £42.50, £12.99 pb.; Andy Mousley, *Renaissance Drama and Contemporary Literary Theory*, Macmillan Press, 2000, pp. viii + 244, £45, £14.99 pb.; Stevie Simkin, *A Preface to Marlowe*, Pearson Education, 2000, pp. x + 270, £60, £15.99 pb.

Shakespeare and his gang have been involved for many years in some of the more heady experiments with that most intoxicating of draughts, 'literary theory' and the strain, it seems, is beginning to tell. In very different ways each of these books offers evidence that early-modern dramatic writing has somehow 'come through' the spiralling highs (and some dismal lows) of a generation's worth of over-indulgence. This is not rehabilitation, though, since none of the writers is in the least way committed to restoring or recreating some 'innocent' pre-theory Shakespearean vision. Indeed, the cocktail that is theory has had the admirable effect of purging the body of Renaissance dramatic writing of an earlier dependence. Although traces remain, it is hard these days to find totally unchallenged the assumptions and institutional practices of that pre-theory period when the study of Shakespeare, especially, was the pure narcotic of a dreamy nationalism (and a kind of literary pink-gin of colonial superiority) as well as a guarantee of cultured superiority, a cure-all for wayward human nature and a chemical cosh with which to beat the working class.

A generation of theory has altered the consciousness of readers and theatregoers alike with quite stunning effects. Not only have the traditional

texts been reviewed in terms of their representations of class, gender, ethnicity and place, but the canon itself has been subject to joyous revision – against earlier aesthetic hierarchies and through the transforming register of women writers who turned out not to be a feminist hallucination after all.

Theory, however, has come to be thought and spoken of, in the day-to-day practices of teaching in particular, as an authority somehow more powerful than the sum of its component parts. In this sense its general anti-humanist underpinning and broad commitment to a demystification of ‘commonsense’ interpretation and normative values in traditional criticism has been a tonic, and in the study of early-modern drama the result of this has been extremely healthy. What was so powerful about the system of values association with the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was its paradoxical tendency to idealise the historical circumstances of their work to the point that the plays themselves became reduced to a series of proverbial anecdotes that rendered historical differences meaningless. This was especially true, of course, for the British Shakespearean critics of the 1930s and 1940s, dragging national narratives through a hole in history they had successfully fashioned after imbibing quantities of modernist paranoia and wartime spirit. What it’s possible to admire about these old critics, despite their ideological stance, is their sheer commitment to the history they had fashioned, with its practical and long-lasting effects in terms of the curriculum and the staging of the plays. What it’s possible to regret is that their work, which was actually underscored by considerable (theoretical) disagreement and controversy, has been seen as a unitary whole from the commanding position of more recent literary theory.

The lesson in all this for what Andrew Mousley calls ‘contemporary literary theory’ is self-evident, hence the importance of welcoming research which establishes a position against the abstraction of theory, which, if not exactly psychotropic, may induce a slight intellectual numbing of the extremities in the institutional bodies through which it circulates. *Renaissance Drama and Contemporary Literary Theory* might be said to be situated somewhere on the borderline between theory as abstraction and theory as political practice; practice that is, equal to the display of political commitment and agency which, however, ideologically suspect, was clearly present in the pre-theory critics of the past. The book declares something of these anxieties early on, asking ‘Why apply modern literary theories, in the sustained way that this book will, to Renaissance plays? One answer would be, well, why not? Theory would surely not have had the impact that it has had unless its insights were applicable to a range of texts, genres and historical periods.’ There is a tendency in the book for the impact of theory (or theories) to come across as a given (after an explanation early on of the relative uncertainty of the term ‘humanism’, intelligently revisited in application to certain theoretical positions), but the interesting thing is that Mousley answers the question ‘why not’ by asking his readers to ‘recognise some of the ways in which the con-

cerns of the Renaissance/Renaissance drama anticipate some of the concerns of theory ... theory is no longer the master machine which processes and illuminates texts, for the texts themselves now cast significant light upon theory.' The purpose of the book is to suggest ways in which 'Renaissance drama can become a more active partner in [the] potentially unequal marriage' between theory and historical text. This vision of domestic harmony seems to rely on each partner having to sacrifice a considerable amount of historical specificity. On the one hand, the plays themselves seem to float across the centuries into the embrace of theory by relinquishing a great deal of what might be called *Renaissance* 'theory' (conditioning factors such as Religion, Nature, Policy, Justice). On the other hand, 'contemporary literary theory' comes in modular chapters: Semiotics, Structuralism, Poststructuralist, Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Feminism, Marxism. The application of each theory to a set of Renaissance plays (or the application of plays to theory) is admirably lucid and helpful, yet the lack of rootedness for each theory makes them oddly depoliticised; if you don't 'get' one another will be along in a minute. Clearly much could be said about the demise of Marxism as a mainstream 'theory' within or beyond the circles of literary theory (indeed it is a feature of this book that its importance is acknowledged) yet it is strange to see feminism 'negotiated' in this way without a link being made to the material political practices which distinguish it from the other 'approaches' on offer.

Anxiety over the relationship between history and theory frames David Scott Kastan's project in *Shakespeare After Theory*. Wanting to read Shakespeare historically he notes that 'ironically, the most powerful and productive recent critical models of a historical engagement with Shakespeare – those critical practices that either wear by choice or have had attached to them the labels New Historicism and Cultural Materialism – have been regularly charged with exactly the narcissism that history should counter', a paradox which arises 'not from their historical naïveté but from their theoretical sophistication, which forces them to acknowledge the situatedness of the critic as it determines the questions that are asked of the past.' Kastan's book is not 'after theory' in celebration of theory's demise, and it is certainly not dismissive of theory's liberation of Shakespeare from certain idealisms. In fact, the book seems to be 'after theory' in the sense that one painter might be inspired by an earlier, yet with a different project and effect in mind. There is almost a running commentary on the theoretical dilemmas associated with questions of value, meaning, and historicism, yet there is also an implication that some levels of abstract theory have produced a trance-like state in scholarship; for this Kastan provides the antidote of historicity rather than the anecdotes of New Historicism. This is a book about writers, theatres, plays, texts, actors and printers and uses as its source material both official records and contemporary commentaries to reinforce the materiality of early-modern dramatic production in the midst of an unstable and haphazard political climate where the commercial theatre intersects with the

political theatre in the years leading to revolution. The book's theoretical framework (Kastan calls it 'The New Boredom' in the introduction) is more elaborate than he suggests, arguing convincingly for historical difference and the impact our judgement of that difference has on our own contemporary evaluation and use of literary texts.

Stevie Simkin's study of Christopher Marlowe in Longman's Pearson Education series is a compelling piece of research which will have a wide appeal. Like Kastan's book, there is a significant sense of the 'application' of theory, giving force to the problems associated with historicist readings of Marlowe's texts. A lucid exposition of varieties of twentieth-century historicism (New and Old) traces the implications, for a writer with a long history of trouble-making, of critical appropriation by various schools. The material practices of the Renaissance theatre are explored, along with the impact of editing and printing, in order to explore a range of issues in the Marlowe canon which includes the religious scepticism of *Doctor Faustus* and the difficult area of early-modern historiography, notably in discussion of *Edward II*.

The overall theoretical focus is meaningfully explored in the impact that Marlowe's work has in the modern theatre and in this respect the book must be entirely groundbreaking. To test 'literary theory' in performance, in the actual staging of such shocking plays as *Edward II* and *The Jew of Malta*, is a significant application in an arena where no single meaning (or even effect) can be guaranteed and where the intersection of theory and reception is at its most sensitive. Indeed, the few photographs which usually accompany discussion of the staging (and filming) of the plays can reveal very little of the highly important impact of these productions. Simkin's theoretical position favours notions of 'appropriation' (in the theatre, in theory, in film) since the Marlowe text itself is as blank-faced as his portrait at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge; yet this study itself invites a response and commitment from the reader with respect to the application of theory to practice which makes it an unsettling read and rewards his methodological integrity.

Continuing the analogy, Catherine Belsey's illustrated *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, as well as having one of the best titles for a work of criticism in recent years, must also be the ultimate de-tox. As would be expected from this author, it is a work which draws upon the radical theory of recent decades. Yet she states early on that 'while I unreservedly welcome the rereadings taking place in English departments – under headings like gender studies, queer theory, postcolonial analysis – I am uneasy about the predominantly thematic character of much of this work. I regret, that is to say, what I see as a neglect of the signifier, the basic material of the hermeneutic practice I am proposing.' In this study of the way that the 'loving family, our culture's most treasured institution' was constructed in the early modern period Belsey returns to a variety of 'texts' in order to find 'a story of ambiguities, riddling paradoxes and contradictions: a desire to possess (wife, children, property) which acts by destroying, predicated on a lack which fills the vacancy with

fearful imaginings, including marital jealousy and sibling rivalry.’ The range of ‘texts’ under examination is extraordinary: early-modern drama is set against tapestries, the carvings on domestic furniture, and most movingly, the effigies found on contemporary tombs, where a sense of cultural petrification is treated to an analysis which allows an unfreezing of the figures represented in stone – so that they ‘speak’ of the ideological conditions of their lives.

Belsey’s ‘cultural history’ does not suggest an easy relationship with the past, and still less the ‘living history’ available at many an historic site these days: her account of a visit to the manor house at Llancaiach Fawr deals amusingly with this phenomenon. Rather, she theorises historical difference and discontinuity against what she sees as New Historicism’s tendency to treat texts as relatively transparent. All this is done with a sense of political purpose which will invite readers to reassess the function of the family over the centuries and its powerful resonance in the politic structures of our own times. In this sense the book restores faith in a trajectory which links it with theory’s early and more politically explicit days.

**Address for Correspondence**

Simon Barker, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, PO Box 220, Cheltenham GL50 2QF, UK, e-mail: [sbarker@chelt.ac.uk](mailto:sbarker@chelt.ac.uk)