

Josephine Bregazzi 1999: *Shakespeare y el teatro renacentista inglés*. Libro universitario. Materiales/Filología y Lingüística. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. 239pp.

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The scope and general contents of this 1999 study by Jacqueline Bregazzi, of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, are indicated in its title, *Shakespeare y el teatro renacentista inglés*. It provides an overview of the English theatre between 1576, when the first theatre was constructed, and 1642, when the theatres were closed by the Puritan authorities. Interest and analysis are focussed on the dramatic output of Shakespeare, although secondary attention is also given to playwrights who were his contemporaries or near contemporaries, particularly Kyd, Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Ford and Middleton.

The study is published commercially, and in Spanish, by Alianza Editorial as part of its Libro Universitario series, under the rubric of Filología y Lingüística. The three general themes: the theatre, the dramatic work of Shakespeare, and that of his major contemporaries, are structured into nine chapters. The first two are of a broadly informative nature, setting the context for the development of the theatre. The opening chapter, “¡Arriba el telón!”, provides information about the historical context of sixteenth and seventeenth century England, the development of different types of theatre and the parties associated with it —actors, censors, city authorities playwrights, patrons, and so on. The second chapter, “Textos y géneros dramáticos”, highlights the question of text as performance and reviews some of the devices (stage directions, the silent character, repetitions, parallel texts, versification, and so on) which help create a relationship between actor and spectator which differs from that existing between text and reader. The theoretical framework concludes with a review of the sources and nature of the main literary genres —tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, history and court masque.

The seven chapters which comprise the remainder of the study are devoted to individual dramatists and their major works, using a format which moves through biography, aspects of genre and major issues raised by the most popular works. The issues are not made explicit but the major ones would appear to be the role of women, the marriage question, the limits of power, both royal and individual, and the failure of justice. Shakespeare is the subject of three chapters, each of which, following a brief introduction to his life, is devoted to a different genre: comedy in “Shakespeare, el dulce cisne del Avon”, tragedy in “Quiebre el quicio de la esfera: la tragedia shakespeareana”, and history in “Breves crónicas del tiempo: el ciclo

histórico shakespeariano”. Shakespeare is sandwiched between a chapter on his two major precursors, “Los innovadores Kyd y Marlowe”, and three chapters which consider, in turn, his contemporaries Ben Jonson (in “Ben Jonson: a través del espejo deformante”) and John Webster (in “John Webster: la calavera debajo de la piel”), with the final chapter devoted to his two successors, John Ford and Thomas Middleton (“Middleton y Ford: cosas de mujeres”).

There is no concluding chapter to draw together loose strands or to point forward to the Restoration theatre, from 1660 onwards, giving the study a slightly unfinished quality. On the other hand, each chapter has a brief set of end notes which refer the interested reader to particular critical sources, which are otherwise reduced as far as possible in the body of the text. A select bibliography of 163 titles is also provided, spanning some seventy-five years of Shakespeare studies, and broken down into five subsections: the historical and cultural context of 1576-1642 (33 titles); the history of the English theatre (11 titles); the genres and forms of theatre during the period (36 titles); whilst the remaining two deal with Shakespeare (55 titles) and individual non-Shakespearean authors (28 titles). The classification is not an entirely felicitous one, with many overlaps of category. Some titles in the section dealing with the period 1576 to 1642, for example, simultaneously imply a history of the English theatre, as is the case of G. Blakemore Evans' *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama: A New Mermaid Background Book*, and Braunmuller and Hattaway's edition of *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, but do not reappear in the sub-section dealing with the English theatre. At the same time, works such as L.C. Knights' *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1962), Gurr's *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (1987) or Bradbrook's *The Artist and Society in Shakespeare's England* (1982) imply both the history of the theatre at the time and some discussion of the individual dramatist. Similarly, the section devoted to Shakespeare simultaneously indicates genre, for example, Bayley's *Shakespeare and Tragedy* (1981), Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1965) and Berry's *Shakespeare's Comedies: Explorations in Form* (1972).

To judge from the academic details on the book cover, the general contents, the language of the text (Spanish) and the provision of a bibliography imply that the target reader is the Spanish undergraduate student of English. A possible shortcoming of the bibliography, given this implied readership, is the absence of any orientation to act as a guide in the minefield of literary and critical theory. As the spread and incidence of dates might lead one to expect (1 title from the 1920s, 9 from the 1930s; 8 from the 1940s; 12 from the 1950s; 22 from the 1960s; 23 from the 1970s; 61 from the 1980s and 28 from the 1990s), there are scholarly and critical texts to suit every persuasion and criterion. Slightly more than half of the reading list is made up of books from the 1980s and 1990s side of the poststructuralist divide, whilst evergreen Shakespeare scholars and critics from the early part of the twentieth century, such as Wilson Knight, L.C. Knights, E.M.W. Tillyard and Spurgeon, are all included. All the titles referred to are English language titles and do not include any of the more recent studies available in Spanish over the past

decade or so, and presumably also of potential interest to the Spanish-speaking student and purchaser.¹

How can this book be used by the intended reader? Bregazzi declines to answer the question directly. Its contents ostensibly serve as an introductory guide to courses which survey the civilization, culture, and/or literature of sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Alternatively, given that Bregazzi states in the Preface, that her main aims are to foster an appreciation for the richness of English Renaissance culture and draw the reader closer to the experience of the theatre by making the object of the study “el de contemplar las obras como *representación* más que como mera lectura” (9), the fact that the text is in Spanish might also act as an incentive to the reader without a background in English language but with a general interest in the theatre, and whose curiosity about Shakespeare, his work and his world has been aroused by some of the most recent stage productions or commercially-available films of Shakespeare’s work.

The text is written with a good deal of enthusiasm for the subject, an enthusiasm which is maintained despite the fact that there is a lot of ground to be covered. Given the general mission to stimulate interest in the theatre as performance as well as to provide general information about the English theatre, its historical context and Shakespeare over a period of great change, more immediate academic concerns of accommodating the study within a particular theoretical framework are downplayed. My principal reservation about the direct suitability of this book for the undergraduate student centres derives from the explicit rejection by Bregazzi of the latest critical theories in favour of a tacit historicist approach: “... he procurado en todo momento en este libro vincular las obras con su contexto, así con los temas e ideas que reflejan y ofrecen al “análisis” del espectador, sin intentar ajustarlas a ninguna corriente crítica en boga ni apropiárselas para esquemas ideológicos” (9). Whilst it is perfectly understandable that her focus on performance might make her wish to avoid excessive textbook analysis or verbiage, it nonetheless remains the case that part of the learning process of undergraduate students of English involves familiarisation with different theories and a grasp of their implications, one of which is that there are no theory-free readings.

The bibliography mentioned earlier is a text-book example of critical diversity, including some which must fall under the general heading of “una crítica corriente en boga. If the study is aimed largely at the undergraduate, a brief explanation of the different interpretive results that might be expected from selecting three books with similar titles but published at different times (for example, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1992) by J. Drakakis; *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (1930) by L.B. Campbell, and *Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (1950) by C. Leech) might usefully be appended. The bibliographical classification ignores questions of theoretical viewpoint.

¹ Examples of such works are Duque (1991), González Fernández de Sevilla (1993a), González Fernández de Sevilla (1993b) Hidalgo *et al*, (1988), Hidalgo (1997), MacLeigh y Unwin (2000), y Trillo (1999).

Bregazzi does, on page 8 of the Preface, warn of the dangers of trying to talk about the culture of an earlier period using the language and concepts of a later one:

... sería un craso error intentar analizarlas [las obras] mediante la imposición de marcos cognitivos o ideológicos de nuestros días, puesto que al no existir entonces los conceptos de “izquierda”, “derecha”, “feminismo” o “conservadurismo” que se esgrimen un tanto indiscriminadamente hoy, topáramos con múltiples elementos que resultan imposibles de encajar en uno o otro marco. (8-9)

She nonetheless introduces the occasional conceptual anachronism, such as ‘the Other’ (127), ‘self-realization’ (143) and ‘egocentric’ (145) to name just three, which presupposes that the reader is already familiar with a certain type of theoretical discourse and understands the implications of using it. Without explicit recognition of the often invisible linguistic and conceptual barriers which intervene between present-day readers and the object of their interest (barriers recognised by New Historicist critics, for example), it is misleading to the student who might otherwise imagine that the text is free of cultural distortions.

Another reason for not avoiding the question of theory, is that part of the reader’s curiosity might involve discovering the different ways in which people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries construed and tackled issues of gender, politics or justice, issues which remain of current interest even if configured differently. The text of this book, in fact, is considerably enlivened by the author’s comments on the status and role of women in the Renaissance, whilst the final two chapters which cover Webster, Middleton and Ford are noticeably slanted towards the theme of female transgression and the skills they deployed to survive. It seems, therefore, a missed opportunity not to have capitalised on her evident knowledge of the subject by framing it theoretically and making it a positive feature of the work, rather than making ‘theory’ a negative feature.

The implied approach is historicist. A series of dramatists and their works are set, in roughly chronological order, against a background of change. Given the broad scope of the period, sixty-six years, deciding which historical events to mention and which to leave out in a book of this length (less than 250 pages) must have presented a major problem, since the sixty-six years covered by the study were not only fertile in cultural production but subject to continuous interacting pressures from the social, religious, scientific and cultural environment. The adopted approach is not, however, a good one. Bregazzi avoids periodising the study along the lines of the reigning monarchs, Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I, on the grounds that there is too much conceptual, structural and stylistic overlap to accommodate, and adopts instead a scheme in which the theatre is considered in terms of a *continuum*, that is, the evolution of particular forms, which seems to refer to the generic forms of tragedy, comedy, history and masque, although they could also include the public and private forms of theatre). To make this idea of a formal evolution clearer, a more detailed examination of the culture which gave rise to the individual forms and the subsequent two-way interaction between culture and theatre, is necessary. The first

two chapters do, it is stressed, attempt to set the development of the theatre and the generic forms in a historical perspective, but what is missing is an obvious rationale for selection of particular formative events. Some historical figures, events and works are marked by a historical date and others are not. The monarchs of the period 1576-1642 are important for their patronage of the theatre, as an explicit or implicit reference in many dramatic works, or because they were the catalyst or focal point for many of the environmental pressures affecting production or performance of the drama. Nowhere are the monarchs chronologically ordered, and, in the first chapter, the only date provided is that of the death of Elizabeth in 1603. At the same time, the mention of a royal proclamation in 1559 banning the representation of religion or government in theatrical works (37), nonetheless begs the question of which monarch issued the royal proclamation, a datum which is not supplied. On this basis, the average reader who knows little or nothing of English history would be hard pressed to set the works discussed later in any kind of historical context because the provision of dates is so random.

The relative absence of dates, implying the absence of events and cross-tensions, has the serious effect of omitting the reference points which enable conclusions about the relationship between a particular text and its context to be drawn. Where a long list of more than a dozen dramatists *is* supplied complete with dates of birth and death (33), the lack of historical and cultural reference points has the result of detaching dramatist from the contexts in which they lived and worked and making their life dates redundant. Another side-effect of an imperfect configuration, in which the period under discussion is abruptly delimited by two discrete events—the construction of the first theatre in 1576 and the closing of the theatres in 1642—is to encourage the impression that the intervening period was a smooth continuum vaguely etched with general ‘trends’ and ‘forces’. A table with a chronological list of the major playwrights, the titles and dates of their plays, and the most significant religious, social, political, scientific and cultural events of the period, would have been a very useful addition, and perhaps a solution to the evident problem of accommodating a good deal of history into a short space.

Genre is the implicit level of analysis, given the subdivision of Shakespeare’s work into history, comedy and tragedy, but the specific relationship between generic form and the forces in the theatrical or non-theatrical environment is tenuous. Bregazzi describes tragedy, for example, as articulating “con más agudeza que cualquier otro género ese mundo en proceso de cambio del momento, un mundo en estado de flujo entre el pasar de un sistema ya obsoleto y el emerger de un nuevo orden, con su resultante y constante confrontación de fuerzas antagónicas, y su constante fluctuar entre el “lo-que-pudiera-ser” y el “lo-que-es” o el “lo-que-fue” (119). The precise nature of the changes which made one system ‘obsolete’ or contributed to the emergence of a new order, the people who influenced and were influenced by them, as well as the nature of the “opposing forces” remain shadowy and generalised.

In view of the fact that the book is on general sale, a second type of person who might possibly be attracted by the author’s general mission to draw her reader closer

to the work as performance, is the one interested in the performing arts or whose interest in Shakespeare has been stimulated by the many recent commercial stage or screen productions of his work. General information about the theatrical world and a summary of performative devices with an impact on an audience are provided in the the first two chapters. Subsequent chapters, which shift the focus to playwrights, plays and, in Shakespeare's case, genre, are accompanied by a corresponding shift away from the general context of performance in favour of the provision of details more appropriate to the medium of the printed text: editorial information, biographical details, unproblematised summaries of themes or critical controversies. This is the case with *King Lear*, for example, which refers to verbal images and metaphors of chaos; details the date and place of first performance, mentions discrepancies between Quarto and Folio editions, notes examples of the distinctions made by cultural materialists and humanists in their critical responses to the play and comments on different levels of theoretical complexity. All this, before, finally, we are placed in the position of the spectator when we reach the impact of staging Edmund overhearing his father, Gloucester, commenting on his own illegitimacy, or the scene in which Cordelia unmask the hypocrisy and greed of her sisters by her silence (143-44). These two scenes then form the springboard for a more interesting discussion of father figures in the contemporary (seventeenth century) context of James I's attempts to unify the kingdoms of Scotland and England, his tendency to favouritism, and conflicts between James and his son, Henry. More 'scholarly' aspects of the discussion which are not germane to the play being discussed could be jettisoned and the space devoted to amplifying more interesting aspects of the play in performance, whether in seventeenth century or later versions. It is not that performance is ignored, simply that it is sometimes difficult to discern the implications of textual detail for performance, or the implications of performance for an audience. The author recognises that the impossibility of including everything, but since the introduction raises expectations, perhaps unintentionally, about performance, the type of reader alluded to earlier might welcome amplification in a future edition of precisely the performative aspect, duly theorised, at the expense of superfluous editorial, critical or biographical details which, in the case of Shakespeare, are well documented in other textual sources.

In summary, the most interesting parts of the study concern the translation of text to stage and more in-depth discussion of issues which connect the Renaissance period with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the role of women. Its defects stem partly from the difficulty of covering a subject of such breadth over an extended period, partly from the absence of a theoretical framework to orient the reader leading to an unproblematised treatment of certain themes, and partly from the historicist approach, which divorces text from its particular context. I see two, possibly overlapping, readers of this book: the Spanish undergraduate of English and the Spaniard interested in performance, each implying different concerns. The lack of theoretical standpoint is unsuitable for the university student. The initial strong attention to performance would attract the second reader but interest would wane in proportion to the amount of textual criticism encountered. The result is that neither reader is wholly satisfied. The question of what information needs to be incorporated

and what approach to take would be better resolved by refining the nature of the reader.

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