Talking Books with Lukas Erne

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Abstract

Interview sur des publications dans les études shakespeariennes

Reference

Every several years someone writes a book that every Shakespearean has to read. These books challenge the assumptions behind the way we think about Shakespeare and his work, and shape future discourse. Such a book is Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist by Lukas Eme (Cambridge University Press, 2003). He argues that Shakespeare intended his plays to be published and read, and prepared some of them as literary texts that were then shortened for performance. The evidence and arguments for this are presented in 260 cogent and tightly argued pages. Even if one is not persuaded by all of Eme's ideas, no one in our field can ignore this book.

While this title has captured most of the attention, Lukas has published three other books since 2000. He edited The Limits of Textuality, the thirteenth in the series "Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature" (Narr, 2000) with Guillelmette Bolens. It collects some of the papers given at the International Conference on the Limits of Textuality, at the University of Geneva in 1999. Textual Performances: The Modern Reproduction of Shakespeare's Drama (Cambridge University Press, 2004) was edited with M. J. Kidnie. The thirteen chapters include an all-star cast of contributors such as Leah Marcus, David Bevington, Michael Warren, Ann Thompson, and Ernst Honigmann. They consider the editing of Shakespeare's plays, weighing playhouse research, biography, and printing house practices as editors navigate this background with the needs of modern users in mind.

Of special interest to me is Beyond 'The Spanish Tragedy': A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd for the Revels Plays Companion Library (Manchester University Press, 2001). It studies all of Kyd's publications, presenting fresh perspectives on the neglected works, and extensive treatment of The Spanish Tragedy, arguing that parts of the lost play Don Horatio are appropriated into the text of The First Part of Hieronimo. An edition of the first quarto of Romeo and Juliet should be available at any moment from Cambridge University Press.

Lukas is Swiss born and educated, with post-graduate work in Oxford as a Berrow Scholar from 1994 to 1997. After teaching at the University of Geneva, he became Professor of English Literature at the University of Neuchâtel. Lukas has recently returned to Geneva to take the Chair of English Renaissance Literature. He won the 2002 Calvin and Rose G. Hoffman Prize for the essay "Biography, Mythography and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe." It has just been published in Modern Philology, 103 (2005).

MPJ: You have made quite a splash for such a young man. Who are the teachers, and which books turned your interests in this direction?
LE: I've had a number of stimulating teachers, but there are three who have been particularly important. During the five years I studied at the University of Lausanne, Neil Forsyth—whose recent book on Paradise Lost, called The Satanic Epic (Princeton University Press, 2002) has received a prestigious prize from the Milton Society of America—first made me appreciate many of the great early modern authors I still love and work on today, notably Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, and Milton. The "Shakespeare in Performance" trips to Stratford-upon-Avon which he organized led me to write my MA thesis with him on Shakespeare. So he has a lot to answer for. Then, during my years in Oxford in the mid-90s, I was lucky enough to work with Emmy Jones and D. F. McKenzie—superb teachers and scholars both. McKenzie taught me what pleasure and profit can be derived from textual and bibliographical work. As for Jones, even though the doctorate he supervised was on Kyd, I realize retrospectively that he has taught me more than anyone else about Shakespeare. I never discussed the argument of Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist with either Jones or McKenzie, but it was no doubt the experience of working simultaneously with the two that turned my interest in this direction.

MPJ: The long bibliography and extensive notes in Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist almost make this interview superfluous, but let's pretend someone is not going to read everything, and wants to see the key texts that helped your research. Where should they begin?
LE: A number of articles and books paved the way to specific parts of my argument, so they might be a good place to start: Peter Blayney's "The Publication of Playbooks," in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan's A New History of Early English Drama (Columbia University Press, 1989) made me reconsider the early publication history of Shakespeare's playbooks; Andrew Gurr's New Cambridge edition of Q1 Henry V (2000) and his 1999 "Maximal and Minimal Texts" article in Shakespeare Survey were important for their conjunction of insights from stage history and textual studies. Richard Dutton's "The Birth of the Author," in Cedric Brown and Arthur Marotti's Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England (Palgrave, 1997) influenced my thinking about Shakespeare as a dramatic author; and Stephen Orgel's "The Authentic Shakespeare" and "Acting Scripts, Performing Texts," both now available in The Authentic Shakespeare: And Other Problems of the Early Modern State (Routledge, 2002) helped me recognize the importance of the "bad quartos"; for my argument. Giorgio Melchiori's essay in The "Hamlet" First Published (Q1, 1603): Origin, Forms, Intertextualities (London: Associated University Presses, 1992) preceded me in thinking of Shakespeare as a literary dramatist; Laurie Maguire's Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The "Bad" Quartos and Their Contexts (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and two Shakespeare Quarterly essays, of 1990 (41:1 "Narratives about Printed Shakespearean Texts: 'Foul Papers' and 'Bad Quartos'") and 1999 (50:3 "A Century of 'Bad' Shakespeare Quartzos") by Paul Werstine were important for their revisionary thinking about the "bad quartos"; other articles by Werstine and William Long convinced me of the importance of the extant manuscript playbooks. Brian Vickers' edition of English Renaissance Literary Criticism (Oxford University Press, 2000) helped me understand that there is nothing anachronistic about the concept of Shakespearean dramatic authorship; and his incisive review essay of the Wells and Taylor Textual Companion in The Review of English Studies (1989), contributed to my sense that many of the Shakespeare texts we have been studying are very different from the plays as they were performed by Shakespeare and his fellow players.

A number of studies have had a more diffuse but perhaps equally important influence, for instance the Textual Companion (Oxford University Press, 1987) I just mentioned, which I find to be a prodigious achievement, despite my occasional disagreements; Richard Helgerson's Self-Crowned Laureates: Sidney, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System (University of California Press, 1983) which helped me think about Shakespeare's place in the "literary system" of his time; Harry Berger's Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page (University of California Press, 1989) with its enabling articulation of a specifically readerly response to plays; and Arthur Marotti's Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric (Cornell University Press, 1995) which contains an incisive study of the process of legitimizing of printed lyric poetry.

MPJ: I have noticed that even those who hate the Oxford Complete Works, and that word is not too strong for some people, have to contend with the completeness, thoughtfulness, and frequent good judgment of the Textual Companion. After twenty years it is still the place most of us turn first. What have you read since publication that supports or perhaps argues with your thesis?
LE: I've been very fortunate with the quality of the response to my book. Many of the reviews I've come across have been genuinely helpful, not only expressing appreciation but also raising questions which call for further reflection and investigation. On top of the reviews, there was the 2004 conference at the University of Lancaster, "The Return of the Author in Shakespeare Studies," organized by Richard Wilson, at which the book was incisively discussed by many participants. Plus, and this has been a source of continued enjoyment, I've been receiving many emails, some from scholars (concluded on page 78)
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I greatly admire, some from people I'd never heard of, and a few of these emails led to prolonged exchanges from which I've learnt a lot. The total response has been so multi-faceted that it would be unfair to single out one aspect or one scholar here, but I will obviously want to make my contribution to the continuation of the dialogue.

MPJ: I noticed that you cite some books with German titles. The work that pointed out in a review as early as 1901. The best edition of remains standard, but it is hopelessly outdated. It is really pre-New readily available texts do you recommend? not professional Shakespeareans, so please forgive a deliberately ignorant it very much. It is fascinating, learned, yet accessible. Some of our readers are reception in music and the visual arts.

LE: There is a lot of material in German that deserves the attention of Shakespeareans, beginning with seventeenth-century adaptations of Shakespeare plays by itinerant players, some of which have never been translated. As for modern scholarship, if I had to designate a candidate for translation, I would recommend Part IV of the Shakespeare-Handbuch, edited by Ina Schabert (4th ed., Kröner, 2000). Parts I to III (about the period, the man, and the work) are useful without breaking new ground, but the last part, about the Shakespeare reception, provides an excellent survey, with comprehensive historical and geographical coverage, including the reception in music and the visual arts.

MPJ: I read your book on Thomas Kyd over the Christmas break, and like it very much. It is fascinating, learned, yet accessible. Some of our readers are not professional Shakespeareans, so please forgive a deliberately ignorant question or two. What is the standard text of Kyd's work, and which of the readily available texts do you recommend?

LE: The edition of The Works of Thomas Kyd by Frederick S. Bos (1901) remains standard, but it is hopelessly outdated. It is really pre-New Bibliography, and ignores all rigorous principles of scholarly editing, as Greg pointed out in a review as early as 1901. The best edition of The Spanish Tragedy is still that by Philip Edwards in the Revels series, though it too is coming of age (1959). Among the more recent and more lightly annotated editions, I would recommend J.R. Mulryne's in the New Mardamia series (rev. ed., 1989) and David Bevington's in the Revels Student series (1996).

MPJ: I've been looking for an excuse to publicly thank Philip Edwards and his wife. They befriended me at the first conference I attended. I did not know anybody, and felt generally out of place the way shy people do. They talked to me during breaks, always returning kindness for my ignorance, and helped me feel I belonged. I shall always be grateful to them. Where do you think discourse on Kyd will go next?

LE: The Spanish Tragedy will remain the key text, but I am convinced that much is to be gained from looking at the play in the context of Kyd's other works, in particular The First Part of Hieronimo and what it preserves of the otherwise lost Don Horatio. Reading The Spanish Tragedy without awareness of the other play with which it originally formed a diptych is a bit like reading the second parts of Henry IV or Tamburlaine without awareness of the first.

MPJ: Are there any books of the past five years that you think deserve more attention than they have received?

LE: Yes, there is one that comes to mind immediately, a reference work, arguably the most important reference work since the Short-Title Catalogue. I'm thinking of Steven May's three-volume Bibliography and First-line Index of English Verse, 1559-1603, published in 2004 (Thoemmes Continuum). It may end up transforming important parts of English literary modern studies if we fully exploit its potential. So far, I've only come across one review, but it's a very useful review, and easy to access, too, in the online journal Early Modern Literary Studies, by Douglas Bruster.

MPJ: Readers may find it at http://www.shu.ac.uk/ehmi/11-2/revmayril.htm. What are the most important books on Shakespeare's literary qualities?

LE: There is a small number of outstanding books all of which explain to me an important aspect of how Shakespeare's dramatic arts works: George T. Wright's Shakespeare's Metrical Art (University of California Press, 1988) and Brian Vickers's The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose (Methuen, 1968; revised edition 1979) are key for the artistry of Shakespeare's language; they are also nicely complementary, Wright teaching us how Shakespeare used meter, Vickers how he used prose. Emrys Jones's Scenes from Shakespeare: The Semiotic Form of Shakespeare (Oxford University Press, 1971) is the best book on Shakespeare's scenic organization, but it is essential reading for much else, too, such as Shakespeare's adaptation and transformation of his own earlier work, his dramatization of time, and his use of a two-part structure. David Bevington's Action Is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture (Harvard University Press, 1984), finally, is for me the key study of Shakespeare's stagecraft. No one would want Shakespeare studies to be confined to an investigation of the works' artistry, but I am convinced that our enjoyment of and engagement with Shakespeare would be much impoverished without those scholars who fully alert us to this artistry.

MPJ: Whose books do you greatly admire?

LE: Well, there are many scholars whose books I admire, but if I have to single out one of them, I'll go for Ernst Honigmann. It's hard to think of a Shakespearean who has made us rethink so many key issues, textual, biographical, and critical. For instance, Shakespeare: The Last Years (Manchester University Press, 1985, 2e 1998) is the foundational text for much recent revisionary work on Shakespeare and religion, and The Stability of Shakespeare's Text (Edward Arnold, 1965) did much to stimulate thinking about Shakespeare and revision. Incidentally, Honigmann also argued against the mistaken consensus of Shakespeare's alleged indifference (or opposition) to the print publication of his playtexts, and he did so even before I was born.

MPJ: Name a Shakespeare book that is just plain fun.

LE: Let me recommend one which you may never have heard of: A Few Words about William Shakespeare's Plays (1780), by my fellow-Swiss Ulrich Bröker, a peasant who worked hard all day, and read and wrote about Shakespeare by night. Bröker is a wonderfully enthusiastic and surprisingly shrewd reader, considering his lack of formal education. Readers of your column may want to know that his short book has been translated into English by Derek Bowman (Continuum, 1979).

MPJ: Excellent. Are there any books you'd like to mention, but I lacked the wit to ask about?

LE: Patrick Cheney is doing important work which reminds us that Shakespeare, throughout his career, was both a dramatist and a poet, and was thought of and published as a dramatist and a poet. Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright (Cambridge, 2004) and a book with the probable title Shakespeare Invisible: Authorship, Print, and Theatre (forthcoming from Cambridge) show that this is a distinctive form of authorship that can be traced back all the way to Ovid. Hamming and Condell did us a great service by producing the First Folio in 1623 with almost all of Shakespeare's plays, but our view of Shakespeare still hasn't fully recovered from their exclusion of the poems. Patrick Cheney is also editing The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry, which promises to be more than a state-of-the-art survey, for it really advances what seems to me a compelling argument, which is that when studying Shakespeare's poetry, we need to look not only at the poems but also at the plays.

MPJ: What needs are there crying out for a book that perhaps you don't want to write?

LE: It's not a book I wouldn't want to write but which only one person can write. The person is Peter Blayney and the book is The History of the Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501-1616. He's been working on it for some time, and it will no doubt make a real difference once it's published.