Review of Michael Alexander, Reading Shakespeare

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Abstract

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Reference


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**THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

Lukas Erne


Michael Alexander's new book focuses on reading Shakespeare, on Shakespeare as read, on Shakespeare through reading, although he acknowledges in the preface that 'reading and performance are reciprocal parts of the one process, each feeding and needing the other'. In barely 160 pages, he provides wonderfully succinct introductions not only to more than half of Shakespeare's plays, but also to the *Sonnets*, the biography, and the theatre of his day. The chapters proceed chronologically, conveying a sense of Shakespeare's career, from beginnings via the lyrical plays, the second tetralogy, the early Globe and problem plays to the great tragedies and late romances. The structure is familiar and now a bit old-fashioned, but, as Alexander unapologetically points out, the aim of his book 'is to be helpful rather than novel'.

Perhaps surprisingly, the play which receives the most extended treatment — the only one with a separate chapter apart from *Hamlet* — is *The Merchant of Venice*. Alexander convincingly establishes that history has turned the play into something vastly different from what it originally was. With characteristic economy, he often takes no more than a sentence to make an important point: 'Today Venice is a shell, a relic; yet in 1597 Venice still had an empire and England nothing outside the British Isles'. He similarly combines concision and insight when commenting on the play's fraught politics of marriage: Shakespeare 'makes it clear that Bassanio and Lorenzo begin as unthrifty adventurers, and end richly married. ... And both marriages are made possible by money either lent or stolen from Shylock'.

No Shakespeare critic is referred to more often than Samuel Johnson, whose 'Preface to Shakespeare' Alexander calls 'a fount of commonsense'. Like Johnson, Alexander is not afraid to judge: with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'Shakespeare raises his game to new heights of invention'. *Much Ado About Nothing*, on the other hand, 'is better to see than to read, and better to read than to think about'. Pitiful formulations abound and are one of the delights of this book: *Love's Labour's Lost*, we are told, ends 'not in four weddings but in a funeral and a year's mourning'. As for *Richard II*, 'we pity him less than he pities himself'. Alexander not only writes forceful prose but is also unusually receptive to Shakespeare's language. He is particularly good when his pace momentarily slows down, allowing him to pay close attention to specific passages (such as Mistress Quickly's famous speech on Falstaff). He seems less at home in other areas: co-authorship, in which Shakespeare engaged throughout his career, is given short shrift, and the probably collaborative *Edward III* (now included in several complete works) does not appear in the list of Shakespeare's plays. Alexander is interested in the heart of the matter, not its fringes, and his book explores it with admirable insight and concision.

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**CLOSE READERS TOGETHER**

Neil Rhodes


Academic literary study has for decades been in thrall to historicist forms of criticism and before that by 'theory'. As the editors of this volume mildly put it, 'context began to dominate the critical scene after about 1975'. But while formalist approaches to literary texts were then routinely dismissed as a decadent relic of liberal humanism, opponents of this worthless dalliance with the aesthetic could not quite bring themselves to denounce close reading. And with good reason. It has its origins in the rhetorical treatises of Cicero and Quintilian, continues in different forms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and, as the editors remind us, is 'as close to a shared methodology as literary study is ever likely to have'.

What is on offer here are 39 short essays, of around seven pages each, roughly half of which are on Shakespeare and the rest on the other major writers of the period. The quality of the close reading throughout this volume is extremely high. Its touchstone is the work of Stephen Booth, one of the greatest Shakespearean close readers of the last half-century, to whom the book is dedicated.

Before criticism comes editing, since critics must have an authentic text to read.