Review of Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography

ERNE, Lukas Christian

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Seven years after her well-conceived collection of essays, *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England*, Marta Straznicky has assembled another series of densely argued and documented contributions by leading scholars and provided an editorial frame that makes them convincingly cohere. Her collection “explores how the trade in books affected the interpretation of Shakespeare by early modern printers, publishers, and booksellers and how their interpretations in turn shaped Shakespeare into the ‘great Variety’ of print commodities he would become in his first fifty years as published author” (2). In addition to a compelling introduction, Straznicky contributes two appendices that usefully complement the essays: a chronological table of Shakespeare publications to 1640 and a series of “Stationer Profiles” with biographical information about Shakespeare’s printers, publishers, and booksellers, the publications in which they were involved, and bibliographies with scholarly work devoted to them.

The first of the nine essays, Alexandra Halasz’s “The Stationers’ Shakespeare,” adds to Straznicky’s introduction by offering a chronologically organized discursive survey, from *Venus and Adonis* (1593) to the First Folio (1623), of how Shakespeare’s texts came to be disseminated by members of the Stationers’ Company. As Halasz suggests, “the interests of the book trade and the playing companies were not necessarily antagonistic” (26). When a Shakespeare playbook appeared in print, “the players did not lose their property rights” in the performed play, and bibliographic publication could thus enhance the company’s “textual property,” not diminish it (26–27).

Six essays are devoted to individual stationers. Adam Hooks focuses on Andrew Wise, who published the three best-selling Shakespeare plays during the dramatist’s lifetime, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *Henry IV*, Part 1. It is

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easy to underestimate the importance of Wise, Hooks argues, for “in publishing and publicizing Shakespeare’s most successful plays he did only what now seems obvious” (50). Yet Wise acted “at an important juncture in Shakespeare’s career in print, for he both produced and demonstrated Shakespeare’s viability as a playwright within the rapidly expanding market for printed playbooks” (50). Wise eventually sold the rights in his Shakespeare plays to Matthew Law, from whom they were inherited by Law’s son-in-law, John Norton. Norton published five more editions of Richard II, Richard III, and Henry IV, Part 1 from 1629 to 1639, thereby becoming “the most active publisher of Shakespeare during the 1630s” (148). Norton and the Politics of Shakespeare’s History Plays in Caroline England” (147) is the topic of Alan B. Farmer’s essay. He argues that Shakespeare’s history plays “retained a certain political currency in Caroline England because they dramatized the dangers of civil war during a period in which the Crown and its supporters saw themselves facing several imminent threats, the most serious of which was that of rebellion by Protestant religious radicals” (149). Since Shakespeare’s plays “offered a vision of England’s past in which the most pressing threat to royal authority and the nation’s political and religious institutions was domestic revolt, not Catholic plotting,” they were “ideologically consistent,” Farmer suggests, with Norton’s other “Laudian publications” (174).

Kirk Melnikoff’s aim is to shed new light on the first quarto of Hamlet (1603) by examining the output of its publisher, Nicholas Ling. He argues that from 1596 Ling “invested a significant amount of his energy in texts that engage in substantial ways with republican themes” (96) and that his interest in republicanism may be behind Ling’s decision to invest in the play. Coming in the wake of Andrew Hadfield’s Shakespeare and Republicanism (2005) and related scholarship, Melnikoff maintains that the first quarto of Hamlet and Ling’s other publications may provide an “alternative genealogy of early modern republican discourse, one discernible within the limited constellation of a bookseller’s publishing specialities” (97).

Sonia Massai’s essay turns to another crucial publisher of Shakespeare, Edward Blount, whose list included not only the First Folio (1623) but also titles by Jonson, Marlowe, Montaigne, and Cervantes. Yet, “despite his reputation as a successful and discerning stationer,” as Massai points out, Blount “routinely relied on patronage to present [his books] to his readers” (136). Her essay argues for a “Sidney-Herbert-Montgomery patronage network in the establishment of an English literary canon in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries” (139) in the context of which the choice of William and Philip Herbert as patron dedicatees of the First Folio becomes more easily understandable.

Whereas Blount was remarkably discriminating, John Waterson, as Zachary Lesser’s essay demonstrates, was a flop. His one Shakespeare publica-
tion, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (coauthored by John Fletcher), had no success and, worse, he essentially drove his bookshop into the ground. To understand what happened, Lesser proposes “a new way to think about the book trade: investigating early modern print culture from the perspective of the ‘publishing shop’” (178). The Crown bookshop in St. Paul’s Churchyard was in the hands of Simon and his son John Waterson over a period of seventy years. The father had run a successful business, but John did not, and “his failure may have resulted,” Lesser claims, “from his decision to move the family publishing shop away from its traditional speciality” (187).

Holger Schott Syme’s essay tries to advance our understanding of the economics of playbook publication by comparing the successful business of Thomas Creede with the unsuccessful business of William Barley. Both stationers were involved in the publication of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the 1590s, when a significant market for playbooks was coming into being. Syme suggests that the relative brevity and low price of playbooks means that publishers could not rely on them alone to make a significant profit and that they also needed “high-risk, high-yield projects” (46)—which Creede had but Barley did not—in order to thrive in the book trade.

The remaining two essays are particularly thought provoking. William Proctor Williams reminds us of how little we know about the government licensing of play texts for the printing press before 1607, when the task was assigned to the Master of the Revels. A Star Chamber decree of 1586 had entrusted the licensing of all texts to the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of London, but, being too busy to peruse the texts themselves, they delegated it to “what we would now call their staffs—chaplains, secretaries, and prebends of their cathedral chapters” (66). Between 1586 and 1606, over a dozen licensers can be identified, and Williams tracks the career of one of them, Zachariah Pasfield, who was in charge of sixteen plays between 1600 and 1607, including *Hamlet* in 1602. Williams has no definitive answers to some of the most pressing questions—did Pasfield and other licensers “have the power to alter texts as did the Master of the Revels for performance?” (74)—but his article has the merit of identifying an area where more research is needed.

Finally, Douglas Bruster’s essay, “Shakespeare the Stationer,” stands out from the collection in that its argument has important implications not only for bibliography and book history but also for our understanding of Shakespeare and his dramatic art. Bruster starts with the commonsensical point that Shakespeare, who lived not far from St. Paul’s Churchyard, the heart of the English book trade, must have noticed that his plays were becoming a conspicuous presence in book shops around the turn of the century. Moreover, Bruster argues, Shakespeare “seems to have noticed book sales” (113) of his own playbooks and adapted his dramatic writing to
what book buyers wanted. “Between the end of 1600 and 1602 Shakespeare probably recognized book buyers’ lack of interest in his dramatic prose” (127). In other words, what they wanted from a Shakespeare playbook is verse: “the percentage of verse and prose in a Shakespeare playbook appears to have made an enormous difference to customers” (124). Plays from what Gary Taylor has called Shakespeare’s “prose period” failed to be reprinted (Much Ado about Nothing, The Merry Wives of Windsor) or did not reach print at all during the dramatist’s lifetime (As You Like It, Twelfth Night); by contrast, plays (almost) exclusively in verse, like Richard II and Richard III, were best sellers. Shakespeare’s history plays generally seem to have sold very well, but the one with the highest prose ratio (more than 50 percent) was a commercial failure: Henry IV, Part 2. After 1602, Shakespeare stopped writing plays predominantly in prose, and “the trigger for the switch back to verse,” Bruster suggests, “came from outside the playhouse, from the bookshops of London” (129). Not everyone will agree with Bruster’s argument (and the success of Henry IV, Part 1, with almost 50 percent prose does muddy the water), but he offers a resonant case for a Shakespeare not only interested in the publication of his plays but also closely responsive to their reception in the book trade.

Lukas Erne

University of Geneva