Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage by Kurt A. Schreyer (review)

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volume on Marlowe (2011) and his *Shakespeare's Marlowe* (2007); M. L. Stapleton's *Marlowe's Ovid* (2014) and his co-edited (with Sarah K. Scott) *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman* (2010); these are just some of the landmark Marlowe publications of recent years, fostered and supported by Ashgate. Duxfield's book is a worthy inclusion in this lineage, and Marlovians will have to wait to see what Routledge intends to do in the critical space they've acquired.

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Kurt A. Schreyer. *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 258. $49.95.

This is a first book, with all that that implies: the courage of discovery, wide reading, an assurance about putting past (and not so past) scholars right while approving the methodologically congenial, as well as confidence in its argument. The risk is always that in the search for support in like-minded books, scholars fail to consider the assessments of and reactions to those books; it is difficult not to believe what we want to be true, and perhaps we don't talk enough with people from other disciplines. The title is clear: it belongs to the growing chorus that insists upon continuity between an undemarcated "Middle Ages" and a "Renaissance" that focuses on Shakespeare in order to claim for him immediate experience of the Mystery Plays, those cycles that made summer holidays attractive for pageantry. Although Schreyer certainly knows that he should be careful, he cannot help slipping into making Shakespeare the center. Writing about how theatre audiences might have learned to recognize the below-stage trap as a door to Purgatory, he claims that "before and during Shakespeare's boyhood, the teachings, objects, and practices associated with Purgatory underwent a profound repudiation" (114), using Shakespeare as a proxy for a period of confusion as well as change. He forgets the huge variety of the population.

His major success is to have used the succeeding announcements known as the Chester Banns, official documents now available in the REED (Records of Early English Drama) volume for Cheshire, which supported the continuation of cycle plays for the civic pride of Chester, their guilds, and people who came to watch them. That is, they resisted attempts to suppress old-fashioned religious plays in order to support a complex and popular civil activity based on tradition and historical precedent. It is amusing to find Ranulph Higden, the fourteenth-century translator of Bartholomeus Anglicus as well as a certain amount of historiography, being referred to as one of the Ancients of the city. But it must be

understood that Schreyer's title begs the question and reproduces the narrowing of view which is the name "Shakespeare." The book is not mainly about Shakespeare, but Shakespeare serves as a proxy for proof.

The core of his work lies in the three central chapters of examination of the material continuities from the cycle plays to early modern London drama: the ass's head prop, Purgatory, and the Harrowing of Hell. His three rather different examples say much about the research that has gone into the making of the book but are, perhaps necessarily, diffuse. In chapter 3 (the "Ass's Head" chapter) he tells us a lot about anti-Catholic mockery of the Pope, but does not seem to know what to do with what he's found. The ass is a protean trope for many things, not least a huge phallus, but—like the dunce, mumming, and mummery—the sexual importance of the Ass and its Bottom make no clear contribution. He jumps past other manifestations of popular drama in the Middle Ages to construct a line of descent from the Mysteries to the death of Shakespeare.

The REED series has, as time has gone on, performed a phoenix-like self-destruction and reconstruction, demonstrating how many false starts there were in the project that have been self-corrected by the evidence as it has accrued. But problems continue to arise. Not least is the usual problem of assuming that the documents in the REED volumes were read by numerous people, believed by many, or likely to represent widespread current views. It is the same mistake often made about the polemics against the London theatre and its actors. Right at the beginning he chides E. K. Chambers for glorifying Shakespeare at the expense of a little-studied Middle Ages, but many of the documents we now take for granted were unavailable, though Chambers and Bentley were pioneers in digging them out of obscurity. In some key passages, he goes on to assert that "the disciplines of literature, history, and art history have, therefore, long dismissed the significance of medieval objects to Renaissance artists and authors" (19). That is dubious, and he is himself guilty of making his own schisms ("calculated acts of periodization" [71] made by the writers of the Chester Banns); it is a very long time since Burkhardt has reigned supreme. This is the kind of generalization regularly made by graduate students who overestimate the originality of their apparently new observations. New Historicism has something to answer for as well, as Schreyer makes comparisons among very different countries and times, as with his passing use of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* (68). Along the way "material culture" becomes "objects," "artifacts" with "agency." He makes his keywords do much more work than careful analysis of what he is saying should allow, with too many assertions and too little careful analysis of what his rapidly flowing polysyllables might mean; too many claims about grammar school education "decontextualizing" the historical particularity of unspecified examples; too frequent references to anonymous "scholars" who now all assume something. It is unfortunate that he slips easily from "resemblance" to unquestioned connection.

"Renaissance culture was well read in medieval genres and literary forms" (24) or "I argue that early modern artists were often preoccupied with medieval artwork" (41) are typical of his generalizations. By the end of chapter 1 he is ready to conclude that "as students of early modern culture, we are predisposed to ignore the historicity of this sweeping array of artifacts" (41). Medievalists have been working on, working with, evidence that demonstrates continuities for a good many years.

The central chapters are restricted to insular drama; that is, drama on the continent is excluded; school and university plays make little or no appearance. This means that there are methodological problems from the outset, as Schreyer tries to correct the bias inherent in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship about medieval drama in particular and the belief that the London stage was part of a widespread movement into humanism and the light. He does not hesitate to replace his acceptance of the history of poor literary criticism with his own speculations—which are quite like the nineteenth-century criticism to which he objects. He seems to believe that Shakespeare saw the Coventry plays, which is possible, but for which there is no evidence, while there is evidence that touring companies came to Warwickshire. It is easier to imagine that Shakespeare's father was one of the Stratford worthies who watched their plays.

The chapter on beasts generally in the mystery cycles (with full attention given to the ass's head as a prop) is full of speculation about the descent of the prop, but juxtaposes it with whatever asses or other beasts Schreyer can point to. The Popish Ass receives attention, but it is not clear how it leads to theatrical ass's heads. The "may have been's" abound here, as does the phrase "if Balaam's ass inspired Bottom's translation" (102)—but why it might have "inspired" Shakespeare is repeatedly asserted, not demonstrated. The chapter on Purgatory is largely about Hamlet's delay in his revenge, with the same problem—for example, "[Horatio's] farewell may have prompted Globe audiences to recall the familiar spectacle of the Doomsday pageants" (132); speculation of this kind is unsupported. If he thinks that having a trap door belongs to the cycle plays, he needs to be specific and to consider that it could come from other sources. The third example is the Harrowing of Hell, which has similar flaws, beginning with an unconvincing gesture to "histrionic conventions and incarnational aesthetics that Shakespeare inherited from the mystery plays like the *Harrowing*" (136); "like" is resemblance, not identity. How might the Porter in *Macbeth* be related to the pageant plays? As a devil, a vice, a drunk? If Schreyer thinks the scene is intended to be understood "as…in fact an elaborate joke that undermines the crown's claims to sacred authority" (137), he is not thinking very hard about contemporary censorship. This chapter, like its predecessors, collects scenes of knocking and asserts again that the example can be experienced throughout the play.

The epilogue mentions Ben Jonson and Marlowe has had a brief look-in, but the book's restriction to Shakespeare defeats research elsewhere. It pained me to see Schreyer finishing by telling his readers about repeatedly encountering the same objections to his ideas that I have mentioned in this review. He says that he addressed this problem at the beginning of the book and in closing claims that perhaps the problem is less lack of evidence than a "reification of Shakespeare." I have no idea what he has in mind, but he seems to contradict what he has claimed elsewhere. In the end, there is no way around the question of conjecture, and repeated assertions do not make things true.

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Frederick Burwick. *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 310. $103.00.

This book examines provincial theatres' role in the formation of working-class identity and consciousness in the industrial age. Burwick begins his study with the proliferation of provincial theatres after the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788, which gave the power of licensing theatres to localized authorities throughout the provinces. This act eroded the state's stranglehold on theatrical representation after the Licensing Act of 1737 and opened opportunities for productions of old and new plays reflecting the world of working men and women. Burwick's research into more than sixty provincial theatres shows us how the oppression of workers and, sometimes, their radical resistances to that oppression became part of performances between 1790 and 1840. Burwick is not making a blanket claim for these theatres as venues for radicalism; however conservative or progressive the politics of the plays, theatre was a space in which industrial, working-class experience was represented and shared.

For example, the old themes of anti-theatricality could be invoked against pro-labor messages when they played on the stage. Ironically, however, anti-theatrical attacks foregrounded subversive messages even as they decried them. The most compelling argument in the first chapter of this book shows us the contingency of plays' themes on the politics of local playhouses, players, and their audiences. Plays like Fielding's *Tom Thumb; or, Tragedy of Tragedies*, and Samuel Foote's *The Mayor of Garratt* adapted their performance to current politics. For example, a comic character could, through the mimicry of the actor, reference a local MP. Burwick makes the point that while the Licensing Act of 1737 assumed that plays were stable products, the realities of performance suggest their contingency on local contexts, a contingency that is all the more apparent after the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788.