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Shakespeare's Dramatic Persons. Travis Curtright.

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Travis Curtright's *Shakespeare's Dramatic Persons* seeks to develop a renewed appreciation for character studies. He does this in part by disputing the long-standing, critical emphasis on contrasting formalistic and naturalistic acting styles. Instead, Curtright suggests that certain aspects of the classical rhetorical tradition created an appearance of interiority in Shakespeare's characters, particularly in the way the actors would engage in "personation" as a means for rhetorically constructing a role. Curtright builds his critical foundation on Bertram Joseph's *Elizabethan Acting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951) and Joseph R. Roach's "vindication" of Joseph's ideas, *The Player's Passion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985). He cites Joseph's work as a "benchmark" that demonstrated the role of the classical oratorical tradition as a model for stage performances of emotion and Roach's text as an extension of that idea, demonstrating the ways in which Renaissance stage-goers believed that an "artful actor" could use rhetoric to both display emotion and engender that emotion in an audience (3). Curtright argues that the element still lacking is "how a rhetorical acting style could impart lifelike impressions" in Shakespeare's characters, and attempting to answer that "how" is the goal of his book (4).

Two of Curtright's chapters feature villainous figures, as he discusses Richard III and Iago in chapters 1 and 4, respectively. In chapter 1, Curtright suggests that Richard can best be understood through the rhetorical concept of *enargeia*, "a practice of particularly vivid description of words or events" (14), and points

to Thomas More's version of Richard III as the source for many of these rhetorical elements, including the "tyrant" character type that becomes a focus of this chapter. He returns to the concept in chapter 4, this time discussing Iago as a "flatterer" type based on potential influences from Plutarch and Cicero. Both of these chapters contain exceptional readings of Shakespeare's text at times. Curtright's observations about moments in *Richard III* depicting the character as an actor with "spacing problems" were particularly engaging, effectively characterizing the villain as a good actor who cannot get his scene to run on cue (29–30). Likewise, in chapter 4, his emphasis on gesture, gazes, and metatheatricality, particularly the ways in which the text creates moments that draw attention to a character's "capacity for lifelike performance" via rhetoric and oratory, was refreshing in its practical performance based approach (106–7).

Curtright's second chapter focuses on the rhetorical notion of "audacity," particularly in its Renaissance schoolroom context, and the ways in which "audacity" can indicate a new reading of Kate's speech at the close of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Curtright leans heavily on Lynn Enterline's *Shakespeare's Schoolroom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) to suggest that *Taming* does not just allude to "humanist rhetorical forms and training but also enacts them" (46). He envisions the character arc of Kate as a pedagogical trial of audacity, where the husbands are situated in the role of the masters who will see which boy actor best deploys feminine rhetoric in the final scene (45–47). In effect, Curtright examines Kate by keeping both the character and the boy player in mind, thus seeing a character whose rhetorical audacity must create paradoxical moments, including Kate's final speech, wherein she demonstrates her rhetorical "supremacy" in a pedagogical activity where success is defined by how well the speaker expresses her inferiority (67).

In his third chapter, Curtright signals a move towards Shakespeare's work in the late 1590s suggesting that it offers a "new and an especially lifelike manner of personation," particularly in the ways in which metatheatricality is constructed (75). Using *Much Ado About Nothing* as his model, Curtright argues that these later works, far more than earlier plays within plays, broke down the concepts of player and audience, introducing "characters who play dramatists" who then must inevitably play the "office of beholder" (75). By introducing several characters in *Much Ado* who spend a significant amount of time on stage observing the plots they have put into motion, Curtright suggests that Shakespeare has constructed characters that "appear not as dramatic persons but real ones" (76).

Overall, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Persons* has many strengths. The depth of Curtright's scholarship alone makes this a valuable text. He constructs, occasionally with an eye towards deconstructing, critical conversations with an apparent ease, offering a meticulous scaffold of notes and citations along the way. One of the more delightful aspects of Curtright's text is its emphasis on theater history in addition to scholarly history. He incorporates historical performances from such luminaries as Edwin Booth, and his conclusion, as he directly states, is

aimed at finding connections between his scholarship and the world of the practical stage, ideally to chip away at the divide between scholars and performers, a gap that he calls the “fifth wall” (145).

That said, I was surprised at Curtright’s almost total neglect of theatrical influences from the late medieval tradition on characters such as Richard and Iago. Though these characters are “tyrants” and “flatterers,” they are first and foremost vice figures and part of a long English theatrical tradition. Other than a footnote, the vice tradition was almost completely absent from this discussion. Nor was this neglect an isolated incident. For example, Curtright’s discussion of performative metatheatricity in *Much Ado* seems to share several traits with medieval morality plays, where personified vices and virtues often stood on stage watching the action. Curtright’s discussion of Marina as a “forensic speaker” in chapter 5 could easily have been put into context with medieval texts depicting women who were forced to narrativize their virtue to navigate a dangerous world. But too often, Curtright drew a direct line from Roman texts and classical rhetoric directly to the Renaissance, neglecting many years’ worth of work by medievalists to dispel the notion that nothing of import happened in that span.

Regardless of this historical gap, Curtright’s text is an important contribution, bringing renewed attention to both rhetoric and the practical realities of performance to enliven the debate surrounding performance styles and the construction of dramatic interiority.

