

Laurie E. Maguire 2004: *Studying Shakespeare: A Guide to the Plays*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell. xiv+242 pp.

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Critics often seem to be like blind men prodding different parts of an unspecified beast: one feels a duck's bill, another an otter's pelt, yet another some amphibian's webbed feet, but the living organism that unites and lends cohesion to the various parts eludes them. Like the platypus, the complete Shakespeare remains an interpretative conundrum, slippery in the critic's grasp. From time to time, attempts are made to take him in whole, but, as Dryden said of Shakespeare's histories, the result is a bit like looking down the wrong end of a telescope, and what we see is a shrunken image "not only much less, but infinitely more imperfect than the life" (1912: 26). Barely a generation ago, Blackwell published Terry Eagleton's super-slim *William Shakespeare*; now, as if Eagleton's exotic and delirious pot-pourri of Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis and semiotics had turned a little stale, the same publisher has brought out a new single-volume "guide to the plays" which looks set to replace Eagleton's as the must-buy book on the Bard for undergraduates. Laurie Maguire's *Studying Shakespeare* is Eagleton's rebel with a cause eighteen years on, settled down and contemplating children; theory in carpet slippers, her book is inadvertent testimony to the domestication of all those *isms* which, far less spicy, are now standard fare on literary studies menus everywhere.

Maguire's intended readers are "undergraduate students," "the intelligent playgoer," "the enthusiastic novice," "the admirer" and "the would-be admirer" (10); her book is, as the jacket blurb explains, a "beginner's guide." Does it work? Certainly, all of Shakespeare has been shrunk to fit here, except the poetry (this is "A Guide to the Plays"), those bits of *Sir Thomas More* and the *Cardenio* fragment. In descending number of extended treatments, the stars of Maguire's show are *The Taming of the Shrew*, the three problem plays, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. (As in Eagleton, the romances receive short shrift; *The Tempest* aside, it seems the time has not yet come for Shakespeare's late plays.) One price of this inclusiveness is that familiarity with plot is taken for granted—an unwise assumption in a work for beginners—as Maguire proceeds on her spree through choice items in the Shakespeare department store, offering snappy observations along the way. The book's arrangement and the works referred to at each point are, as Maguire admits, pretty arbitrary. Each divided into several sections, the chapters have baggy, permeable titles: 1. "Private Life: Shakespeare and Selfhood"; 2. "Marital Life: Shakespeare and Romance" ("Romance" not as literary genre but as in teenage magazines); 3. "Political Life: Shakespeare and Government"; 4. "Public Life: Shakespeare and Structures"; and 5. "Real Life: Shakespeare and Suffering." Some of the content divisions are rather makeshift: "Political Life" runs into "Public Life" (the latter chapter has a section on "Women and Politics," the former on "The Personal versus the Political," which could well have appeared in 1. "Private Life"), while "Real Life" is almost inexcusably capacious even when restricted to "suffering," a restriction which begs the question whether Maguire or Shakespeare or both really do have such a glum view of existence. In her Introduction Maguire writes, "Although some recurrent motifs emerge, I have sought to avoid a polemical through-line, stressing an interrogative methodology rather than a committed

ideology” (10); a drawback of this is that the reader will never know what Shakespeare thought—or what Maguire thinks he thought—about all these various areas of life, thus making *Studying Shakespeare* more a book to dip into than read from cover to cover.

Maguire’s methodology boils down to applying a dash of psychoanalytic criticism and a pinch of social history to the portion of the play under consideration in order to illuminate aspects of Shakespearean character as it reveals itself in diverse situations or in relation to various social institutions (love, marriage, mourning, language, politics, money etc.). As she rightly points out, “character study, and its companion, situation” are extremely useful “point[s] of entry into all Shakespeare’s plays” (8); as a discrete series of such “point[s] of entry,” her book will come in handy to students and, perhaps even more, to lecturers looking around for ideas for practical sessions. A case in point is Maguire’s discussion (5.3 “The Family”) of the Macbeths (205–07). Suggesting that childlessness is “at the center of their tragedy,” Maguire cites Banquo, Freud and Harold Bloom to the effect that Macbeth’s incapacity to father children leads him to murder those of others in compensation. This flirtation with psychoanalysis is then complemented with a historicising discussion of Lady Macbeth’s self-confessed breastfeeding (of that child by a previous marriage mentioned in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*), an activity which Maguire suggests bespeaks her “commitment to motherhood,” since the normal practice for aristocratic women was to recruit wet-nurses. Reading like programme notes to an RSC production, for “beginners” this is all riveting stuff and, as such, a useful introduction to the kind of issues it is legitimate to tease out from Shakespeare’s plays; if used with proper supervision, Maguire’s book is feisty, informative and stimulating.

However, Maguire’s endeavours are vitiated by a series of related theoretical deficiencies. After establishing character as the thread which will guide her through the Shakespearean labyrinth, Maguire proposes that in the age of Shakespeare “character” was attaining its modern sense, defined by my dictionary as a “person’s . . . idiosyncrasy, mental or moral qualities.” She rests her case on the popularity of Plutarch’s *Lives*, Montaigne’s “interest in the flux of identity” and the commercial success of Sir Thomas Overbury’s *Characters* (first edition 1614). But Overbury’s series of characters are essentially updatings of Theophrastus, for whom, as for Plutarch, *χαρακτήρ* (originally the term for a writer’s style) marked individuals as belonging to a moral type rather than defining their own autonomous identities (Russell 1981: 131). Overbury’s characters may be realistic in so far as they conformed to observable types, as did Marcellus Laroon’s famous series of engraved London characters, *The Cryes of the City of London Drawne after the Life* (1687), but neither Overbury nor Laroon were interested in representing recognisable individuals with personal biographies; still operating under the sway of Aristotle, if their representations were to have any useful significance, they had to deal in classes of things, not particulars. But Maguire wants to find in Shakespeare a Bradleyan realism of character which can be shown to be in conformity with historicised modes of behaviour in particular situations. For it is her declared intention to resuscitate “New Realism,”¹ which apparently dates back to the 1950s, is concerned with character and situation, and “has a significant advantage over other scholarly *isms*: its non-specialist vocabulary and subject matter can

1. For all its alleged virtues, “New Realism” is not represented in Russ McDonald’s excellent anthology of Shakespeare criticism and theory (2004).

be accessed by everyone" (8). Unlike A. C. Bradley's subjective pronouncements, which Maguire rubbishes as "self-indulgent creative writing . . . intrusively inventive . . . no critical function" (3–4), New Realism is an attempt to accommodate the study of character to the other *isms* by showing how it is "partly created, affected, and altered by the power structures and cultural contingencies (i.e. situation)" (4). One wonders how much of this is new: what Maguire seems to mean by "situation" is what pragmatists might term "sitedness" or generations of schoolmasters "background," while the alliance of alleged psychoanalytical verities with historical detail smacks of Sidney's account of poetry, which combined the universals of philosophy and the particularities of history. More worryingly, I am uncertain as to what Maguire means by "Realism," although in her determination to make Shakespeare speak to us, hers is usually a maximising account of it. So when Lady Macbeth says "I have given suck," we are to take her at her word and then to ponder the significance of such a statement against historical background regarding the conventional behaviour of aristocratic women. But this is surely wrong. Shakespeare wants the audience to shudder at the unnatural enormity of the immorality to which Lady Macbeth is prepared to be driven, so it is far more shocking to have her tell us that she would rather kill children than go back on her word if we know she herself suckled her offspring: "I would pluck the wet-nurse's nipples from his gums" would not have quite the same effect. In this scene, Shakespeare is foregrounding maternity, not high-birth. Maguire's maximisation of realism minimises other pressures on characterisation, such as the need for compressed, dramatic communication with the audience. Furthermore, it is one thing to establish the historical situation (and here Maguire's minimal account is hardly satisfactory: is she referring to historical situation at the time *Macbeth* was written, or at the time of the historical Macbeth, or to Jacobean perceptions of the historical situation at the time of the historical Macbeth?), quite another to say Shakespeare actually reflects it.

Disconcertingly, Maguire wants to have her cake and eat it. The acid test for Bradleyan Realists has always been Macbeth's "If it were done when 'tis done" soliloquy, which commences with a psychologically convincing, emotionally agitated pondering of the legal and moral/religious pros and cons attached to murdering Duncan and then takes off into exhilarating metaphor, leaving Macbeth behind and locking us into the play's symbolic lexicon. As Nicholas Brooke, following in the wake of L. C. Knights and Cleanth Brooks,² argues "To credit [Macbeth] with the specific images . . . would inevitably lead to Bradley's error of assuming him to be an exceptionally imaginative man. That would make him a poet, and depend on the same fallacy as believing that because most of Shakespeare's characters speak in blank verse they are all poets" (10). What does Maguire have to say (3.2 "Surviving Politics")? "Macbeth's tragedy is partly one of imagination . . . But if imagination undoes Macbeth politically, it also redeems him theatrically. No mere regicide, Macbeth is also a poet" (130). So, having distanced herself from Bradley in her Introduction, here she is driven to Bradleyan conclusions, at the same time as she neglects to historicise "imagination" which, as Frank Kermode tells us in his disappointing shrink-to-fit *The Age of Shakespeare*, was "juridically associated with treasonable plotting" (2004:

2. McDonald's anthology includes Brooks's "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness" (2004: 19–34).

45). But my point is that if Macbeth can be a poet, why not Marcus also, when describing Lavinia's mutilated body? Maguire writes (4.3 "Language"): "For forty-seven lines Marcus *does* nothing, choosing instead to describe the missing body parts . . . I suspect that . . . one of Shakespeare's purposes is to question poetic traditions and the conventional metaphors which underpin them" (174). Here there is a straight contradiction: Marcus's extraordinary ecphrasis is first his own in-character choice (i.e. the responsibility of the Marcus character) and then a choice made by Shakespeare whose polemicising poeticising temporarily gets the better of characterisation. But if that is the case here, why not accept that in the "If it were done" soliloquy the poet was Shakespeare, not Macbeth? In the last analysis, Maguire's interpretative decisions seem just as subjective as Bradley's. Meanwhile, Macbeth's and Marcus's speeches demonstrate that Shakespearean characterisation obeys other imperatives than the merely psychological, be they poetic or, in the latter case, poetic, generic and commercial too, given that the recognition scene with elaborate descriptions was a staple of drama and, as *Cymbeline's* repertoire shows, the audience could not get enough of them.

Maguire's whole idea of realistic character founders on her confusion of conformity to psychoanalytical models of behaviour (what she actually demonstrates) with convincingly real psychology (what she wants to prove). Even supposing that psychoanalytical models do actually describe and explain human behaviour in general terms, they make no claim to represent the particular behaviour of particular individuals in particular situations, which is just what a Realist or a New Realist hopes to find in a Shakespeare play. *Mutatis mutandis*, psychoanalysis gives us Overburian or Laroonian types, which is why Maguire's espousal of psychoanalytic criticism stymies her intention to show how Shakespeare's characters are realistic. Thinking that a type is realistic is like expecting to find the plates of Gray's *Anatomy* perfectly fleshed and boned out on the operating table: things are rarely so straightforward, and many an operation gets complicated or goes messily wrong because reality fails to live up to our representations of it. Despite herself, Maguire is more of a Johnson finding "adherence to general nature" (1971: 266) than a Hazlitt "decyphering [*sic*] [the characters'] peculiar physiognomy" (1985: 275). Thus the lessons she tends to draw from the plays are along the moralising lines of agony-auntish pop-psychology. Imogen's love for Posthumus survives, we are told, "because she ignores all the rational reasons why it shouldn't . . . Sometimes the blindness and short-sightedness of love—its irrationality and its madness—are its greatest strengths" (2.1 "Love and suffering" [64]). If that deserves an embarrassed cough, what about this?

We often lament the lack of imagination in our public leaders, or we lament the inappropriateness of such imagination as they do possess (the conquest and world domination of Tamburlaine, Hitler, Saddam Hussein). Imagination in this context denotes not just vision but humanity. Macbeth never loses his humanity because he never loses his ability to imagine. Unfortunately, the imagination that could make him a sympathetic leader disqualifies him from a successful career in crime; and his emotional failure as a criminal makes political survival as a king impossible. (133)

Not only wrong-headed (it is surely Macbeth's treacherous imagination that leads him to crime), glib (on whose authority does Maguire have it that Saddam dreamed of "world domination"?) and irresponsible (in the light of Maguire's earlier remarks regarding

Macbeth's theatrical redemption thanks to his poetry, how would Maguire react if it turned out that Hitler and Saddam were closet versifiers?), is this extrapolation from Macbeth to a generally applicable type in any way preferable to the particularising, novelistic insights of Bradley?

The confusion of conformity to psychoanalytical models with convincing psychological representation springs from the premise which underlies Maguire's whole theory of character. She seems to think that because we can put ourselves into the skin of Romeos and Juliets, of Aarons and Othellos, because we can identify and empathise with them as they manoeuvre their way through Freudian schemes, frames and scripts, they are therefore realistic. But empathy cannot be a sufficient condition for realism. I may empathise with Edward Scissorhands, Black Beauty and Thomas the Tank Engine, but that hardly makes them realistic. What it does indicate is that I can put myself in their place within the script they are acting out and this is possible precisely because they are not realistic. As schematised types, they are accommodating enough for me to pour into them enough of the relevant parts of my own experiential biography in order to create and sustain the illusion of their reality. This is what Bradley did when reading the plays in his study; this is what the actor does when giving the character dramatic incarnation; readers (in their imagination) and actors (physically) reconstitute and reincorporate or, to use Theseus' term, "body forth," Shakespeare's human schemata, conferring upon them the illusion of the real. This illusory realism is an experiential adjunct to the text brought to it by the interpreter; no unitary, essential, realistic character pre-exists performance or reading, which is why the same character—notoriously, for instance, Henry V—may lend itself to a host of different interpretations.³ To put it differently, consider how little room for manoeuvre there would be in a faithful dramatic portrayal of Dorothea Brooke; consider how much room for manoeuvre an actor playing Hamlet has (notice how it would be impossible to say "playing Hamlet faithfully"). It was Bradley's mistake to pretend that his subjective recreations of Shakespeare's characters were authoritative and definitive accounts; they were certainly realistic, but not necessarily Shakespeare's. Maguire's uneasy skipping from Bradleyan realism to Johnsonian naturalism to New Critical poeticism is probably due to the absence of any interpretative model equal to Shakespeare's characterisation; but it is also curiously mimetic of that characterisation. By turns individuals, types and poets, skipping from one ontology to another, from realism to naturalism to the poetic, Shakespearean characters are, if less real, potentially more convincing and seamless than the platypus.

Maguire's shaky theory of character will go unnoticed by the "beginner" and will not detract from her book's array of such luxury stocking-fillers as the information regarding Henslowe's purchase of real blood and offal from a slaughterhouse close to the Rose Theatre for use in performances of *Titus Andronicus* (210). In short, if not so much a systematic introduction to Shakespeare as a lively and occasionally breathless tour of some of the many areas of human life that his plays and their characters are absorbed in, *Studying Shakespeare* may be recommended warmly for pillaging by curious students, especially those with essay deadlines to meet.

3. Norman Rabkin's famous article "Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*," is included in McDonald's anthology (2004: 245–63).

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