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The Living World of Shakespeare: A Playgoer's Guide

Author: John Wain
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Reviewed by Tony Parr

This book first appeared in 1964, and is now reissued as something of a popular classic amongst modern interpretations of Shakespeare, one that has influenced production of the plays over the past fifteen years and probably helped to mould their audiences' appreciation of them as well. Wain himself says in his new Preface:

"Not only play-goers, but play-producers, have found it useful. More than one stage-director has told me that he looks up my book before going to work ... The book is out there, doing its work in the world ..." (p.x).

It is firmly subtitled A Playgoer's Guide, and is a practical criticism concerned with the experience of the plays in the theatre. As such, it was on first publication the only modern criticism of its kind devoted to Shakespeare (if we except the pages on Antony and Cleopatra in Raymond Williams' Drama in Performance). Other books with a theatrical emphasis (see, eg, David (1978) and Jonas (1971)) rather more substantial than Wain's, have subsequently appeared; but I think this book continues to fulfil a useful introductory function.

As the prefatory remark quoted implies, Wain's book is contemporary with the renaissance of Shakespearean production that we associate with Stratford, England in the sixties and seventies: the emergence of directors like Brook, John Barton and Terry Hands capable of realising the plays on stage as articulate vehicles of ideas as well as supreme embodiments of style. The dissemination of the Stratford example, through influence within the theatre, education, television, and the kind of writing represented in this book, has meant that Shakespeare's radical intelligence has been disclosed to a wider audience, perhaps, than at any time since the 17th century. (I would maintain this claim, I think, in the face of evidence that the Victorians 'knew their Shakespeare' rather better than contemporary readers and playgoers, because 'their' Shakespeare was one largely mediated by the excesses of the actor-managers and the more pious assumptions of the age.) In this process Wain's popular writing has probably been just as important as that of the major academic critics, and rather more valuable than the coffee-table products of modern publishing dedicated to the Bard like Schoenbaum's A Documentary Life.

Wain's book is not written for students - although many of them would benefit from it as an antidote to the more ponderous products of the Shakespeare industry, it is intended (ideally) to reach the ordinary consumer of Western culture. Underlying his commentary on the plays is an embryonic thesis about that culture and Shakespeare's potential place within it. Wain begins, con-

ventionally enough, with the plaint about the contemporary poverty of language and imaginative activity:

"(Modern) children have grown up in a world that uses language only for the most limited of purposes: to convey information. The entire imaginative side of life has been handed over to the visual media of cinema and television. Instead of reading prose narrative and supplying the pictures and sounds inside their heads, the young now have pictures and sound supplied mechanically." (p.4)

But:

" ... these young are separated only by a thin wall from the riches that could be theirs. Living in an age where everything is expressed concretely in images, and nothing abstractly in words, they are actually very close to the world of Shakespearean drama. Because the essence of the poetic language ... is that it is concrete. ... It flashes image after image, without pausing to reduce these images to discourse, in the way these children have learnt to expect from film and TV." (p.5)

This is a complex issue, and its cultural implications are beyond the scope of this review. But they need to be thought about, in relation to our situation in this country. White culture in South Africa is moribund, and has found in television, in the short space of five years, a simultaneous confirmation of and temporary solution to its own bankruptcy: the images imported from America flatter, console and are imitated. Meanwhile, there is virtually no white theatre worth the name, and one of the best indicators of its deadliness, usually, is a performance of Shakespeare. To complete the picture, education in this country uses Shakespeare as an ideological tool, a potent means of reinforcing dominant cultural myths (the importance of hierarchy and political order, suffering as a moral good, the educator as a paternalistic Prospero-figure, and so on). But is it possible to envisage a different grouping of television, theatre - a grouping within which Shakespeare's plays could be a powerful instrument of cultural analysis and communal self-awareness? -

It seems unlikely, although one's doubts are occasioned more by the present realities of apartheid society than by any sense of the essential remoteness of Shakespeare from our lives. African society has long been fascinated by Shakespeare's work, with its roots in oral tradition; and for colonial Europeans Shakespeare is an unavoidable inheritance. The educators and cultural movers of the future will have to make up their minds about him and there will be a great deal of demystifying and reorientation to be done. I think that in this process Wain's book could be useful, because it is a thoroughly practical criticism of the plays and as such is readily available to teachers, actors and producers (and the ordinary playgoer) in ways that standard academic criticism is not. It is highly readable, couched in a colloquial but authoritative style, it is sensible in its handling of historical and theatrical background and it constantly gives the impression of judgements and valuations formed in the theatre. (At certain points this dates the book: it is unlikely that Wain could now so confidently assert the ineffectiveness of Measure for Measure on the stage in the light of some recent productions (see Warren, 1979).

At a number of points, though, Wain's argument requires a stronger framework: his energetic response to the plays needs disciplining by an awareness, a critical scrutiny, of his own norms and expectations, and of how the 'ideal audience-member' - the role Wain fulfils admirably much of the time - is of necessity a conditioned animal. His analysis of Othello suffers in this regard, with statements like: