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Book Review

Bell, Robert H. *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 186 pp. $80.

Robert H. Bell's *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools* provides an idiosyncratic take on the ways in which fools, folly, and foolishness can be productive themes to examine across Shakespeare's plays. By turns entertaining, infuriating, bemusing, wide-ranging, puzzling, virtuosic, and challenging, the book offers an experience that, depending on the reader's predisposition, can feel exhilarating or exhausting.

The book is at its best when it engages in more extended readings of particular plays and characters. Falstaff is a central figure for Bell, and the paradox he identifies as at the heart of his characterization is also central to Bell's overall approach to fools and folly. Falstaff does not veer between sincerity and feigning, but is both – "*always* fooling, ardently sincere about fooling us" (40). This perspective brings in the opportunity for an interesting parallel with Hal's 'madcap' youth as both intrinsic and 'put upon' (43–4). The 'both/and' formulation applies across discussions of other plays and characters, and is particularly productive in relation to Rosalind, a character whose simultaneity renders binaries of gender and identity moot.

As a Joycean, Bell has a keen eye for language. For instance, his discussion of pronouns in *King Lear* is stimulating, tracking a transformation in the "royal we" to something more generously universal, and suggesting that that the repeated use of the first person singular presents a "sense of redefined identity" that might be described as "fool's person singular" (124). Bell's Joycean leanings may also account for the book's breezy and irreverently punning style. This makes for a fast-paced read, but it does become rather flippant at times, and some points are rather rushed over without adequate examination of the evidence.

Bell is also attuned to the importance of humor in folly, showing that it is because Beatrice and Benedick are so funny that we care about them. This alerts us to the importance of the role of humor in the emotional impact of the plays and consequently of the importance of

emotion per se. This does not undo the cruel side of folly, however, articulated most clearly in relation to *Twelfth Night*, where Bell narrates a sense of the way that this play leads its audience into complicity and then exposes our "misguided acquiescence" (91).

Bell's assertion that "Shakespeare's fools bring topsy-turvy and play handy-dandy, leap capriciously between planes of reference, and pit one thing against another: the more far-fetched, the better" (4–5) applies equally well to his own work as it does to Shakespeare's. The book includes references to an omnivorous range of sources and comparisons: to Erasmus, to Groucho Marx, to Beckett, to members of Bell's own family, and on in a tour de force of playful erudition. When these references work, they provide a productive eclecticism that illuminates odd connections and parallels for readers to ponder further, such as the allusion to Robert Frost's description of poetry as a kind of fooling (66). Others, however, miss the mark and leave the reader puzzled. I could not, for instance, see the relevance of the Profumo affair (141). Furthermore, it was not Christine Keeler but Mandy Rice-Davies who uttered the famous phrase "He would, wouldn't he" noted here (141). More frustratingly, the idiosyncratic nature of the footnotes means that there is not always enough information provided to enable the reader to follow up these asides.

Also frustrating is the book's underformulated methodology. There are many statements that are so broad as to be unverifiable. For example, the notion that "*sin* is a word Shakespeare uses very sparingly" (135) is confidently pronounced, but without any supporting evidence from the corpus, or comparisons with similar terms or contemporary writers. This over-confidence is part and parcel of the writing style, which uses noun-is-predicate formulations repeatedly, and almost constantly in some parts, making the reader feel rather bludgeoned than persuaded.

There are some references to performance practice and historical context (e.g. boy actors playing female roles), but mostly the analysis is grounded in close reading that imagines the characters as real people, e.g. "Miranda is incapable of speaking with such indignation and unkindness" (159). This kind of discussion underplays the possible pluralities of interpretation in performance and reading. For example, Bell insists that Orlando recognizes Rosalind when she is disguised as Ganymede. The development of this premise leads to some interesting consequences, but although such an interpretation is perfectly possible, and could lead to some interesting moments in performance, it can hardly be presented as the most likely option. Furthermore, Bell does not take into account the possibilities of sustained ambiguity in performance and reading—a curious lack of application of the 'both/and' principle.

The most problematic aspect of the book for this reader was its lack of a clear examination of the nature of folly itself. The 'Glossary; or, A Rhetoric of Fooling' provided on pages 139–40 is very brief and not referred to anywhere in the rest of the text, leaving the reader to make of it what they will. In any case, it does not provide a discussion of how fooling itself can actually be defined. The book's definitions of folly only happen in passing. For example, in several places folly is linked to madness, but there is no discussion of how madness and folly are distinct and how they are related.

Looking for an extended theorization of the nature of folly here may be missing the point, however. This book performs rather than describes the argument—a fun idea that comes across as breathtakingly cheeky at times. Rather than making a case for it, the book sets an example of reveling in Shakespeare's use of language beyond meaning, in nonsense, in play and in losing control. This tactic demonstrates an infectious enthusiasm for parts of the canon that more fastidious critics might avoid, but lacks the space for sufficient reflection and analysis. As a genre-bending, dizzyingly eclectic flourish, this book enacts the qualities of fooling that it seeks to elucidate, but, like such fooling, it often ends up being more frothily clever than profound.

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