Book Reviews

Loose Ends

Review

- Steve Sohmer**.** *Shakespeare's Mystery Play. The Opening of the Globe Theatre 1599*,. New York: Manchester University Press, 1999. Pages xii+292. $19.95, paperback.
- John Sutherland and Cedric Watts. *Henry V, War Criminal? & Other Shakespeare Puzzles.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pages xvii+220. $10.95, paperback.

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Shakespeare, as Stephen Orgel notes in his introduction to the volume by Sutherland and Watts, loved loose ends. For the last twenty years or so, the predominant trend among literary critics has been to take those loose ends and weave them into a complex narrative highlighting what the critic perceives to be Shakespeare's position on class, race or gender. The best work in these two new books eschews such an approach and instead posits a return to the text–rather than the critic's ideology–as a means of tying-up such loose ends. For this the authors are to be congratulated, though as we shall see, their efforts are rewarded with differing degrees of success.

One of the central claims (among many) of *Shakespeare's Mystery Play* is that *Julius Caesar* and not *Henry V* or *As You Like It*, was the play with which Shakespeare chose to open his new theatre on the banks of the Thames in 1599. Sohmer's argument is based upon a prior suggestion that *Caesar* was an 'occasional play' written for a specific date (in this case June 12, 1599), filled with both calendrical markers and allusions to current events. The current event which, argues Sohmer, drew most comment in the play was the so-called 'calendar controversy' arising from Elizabeth I's rejection of the new Gregorian calendar in favour of the then discredited Julian model. 1599, notes, Sohmer was the year in which the disparity between the two calendars was most marked, with England celebrating her religious holidays some ten days or more behind the rest of Europe.

The *prima facie* case for Sohmer's argument appears to be strong. The opening lines of the play, with its question 'Is this a holiday?', the continuing confusion over the date, and the (deliberately, Sohmer says) anachronistic striking clock all alert us to the way in which time is 'out of joint' in this piece. Indeed, with typical thoroughness, Sohmer notes that only four other plays in the canon contain more references to time. Sohmer seeks to enhance the plausibility of this *prima facie* case by bringing to bear upon the text a vast methodological toolkit: not just the usual close textual analysis and reference to primary sources, but also considerable biblical scholarship, and more innovatively, astrological and astronomical data. The unifying element in this approach is, however, always his contention that: 'The key to understanding Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is seeing the play through Elizabethan eyes in 1599 by the corrupt Julian calendar' (185).

Dr. Sohmer's claims for the results of his methodological innovation are impressive. He provides answers to a number of Shakespearean puzzles: the already-mentioned striking-clock, Brutus's confusion over the Ides of March, and the apparent irrelevance of the discussion in 2:1 over the proper location of the astronomical compass points. His approach to this last problem is illustrative of his polymathic methodology. Providing computer-generated astronomical charts for pertinent nights in the chronology, Sohmer seeks to prove that when Casca drew his sword and pointed to the heavens on the opening night in the Globe Theatre, the actor would be pointing to a star formation whose position in the night sky would highlight the disparity between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. Not content with having reconstructed one specific Shakespearean stage direction, Sohmer then argues that the set-up of the Globe Theatre was such that when Casca pointed to the 'high-east' he would have pointed to a structure in the London skyline with a direct connexion to Caesar: the Tower of London. Indeed, Sohmer goes so far as to chart the tides of the Thames on what he posits as the Globe's opening day, thereby suggesting a further correlation to allusions in the text.

In addition to his geographical, tidal and astronomical suggestions, Sohmer also provides evidence for a claim that in commenting upon the 'calendar controversy,' Shakespeare was using *Julius Caesar* to reflect upon certain contemporary religious debates. A wealth of biblical information is provided, and many ingenious connexions are made, but it is here that one sees the most strain in Sohmer's method. It is one thing to note that two major figures had the initials 'J.C.', but it is another thing entirely to speculate that the trophies hung upon Caesar's image were scarves, that these scarves were purple, and this was, furthermore, an allusion English Passiontide church practice (30). Similarly, when Sohmer claims that Mark Antony's mention of 'brutish Beasts' in the funeral oration is a direct parallel to St. Antony (who was known to preach to

animals), one can feel the author straining to make a connexion, *any connexion* in order to further his thesis. Indeed, so overstated is this aspect of the book that Sohmer misrepresents the nature of artistic allusion. On Sohmer's account is not enough for a text to *hint* at a connexion, there must, he seems to assume, be perfect congruence, why else would Sohmer feel the need to explain away even the slightest deviation from the source material? The author describes his method as 'literary detective work' (p.xi), but the most basic adage of any detective work is 'let the facts lead the case'. At times it is clear, Sohmer has let his theory lead the case, and as another J.C. might say, 'if the facts don't fit, you must acquit'.

The book itself is something of an editorial mess. The main body of the text ends at Chapter 15, but the book continues for another three chapters and eleven appendices, briefly extending Sohmer's methodology to other plays including *Twelfth Night*, and most controversially *Hamlet*, where the author 'proves' that Hamlet was illegitimate. This extra material feels tacked-on, and it is a tribute to the passion of Sohmer's convictions that one bothers to read it at all. Indeed, the redeeming features of this work are Sohmer's enthusiasm for his argument and the scholarly resources that he brings to bear in support of it. Even if one does not ultimately accept his argument in its entirety, one cannot help but become more sensitive to the temporal aspects of the play, and his work encourages closer reading of the text.

Closer reading of the text is also something encouraged by John Sutherland and Cedric Watts's work in *Henry V, War Criminal?* Like Sohmer, these authors focus upon puzzles in Shakespeare's texts. Their approach and their conclusions are, however, notable for their restraint and self-consciousness, two qualities that might have made *Shakespeare's Mystery Play* more scholarly if less enjoyable. Paradoxically, it is these qualities which make Sutherland and Watts's work so pleasurable. A variation on Sutherland's earlier work on nineteenth century literature–*Is Heathcliff a Murder?* (Oxford, 1996), *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* (Oxford, 1997), and *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?* (Oxford, 1999)–*Henry V, War Criminal?* is a collection of thirty short essays (fifteen by each author) on questions as varied as 'Cleopatra–deadbeat mum?', 'Does Bottom cuckold Oberon?', and 'How ancient is Lear? How youthful is Juliet?' Both authors negotiate the questions with skill and verve, though Sutherland, probably having had more practice at this sort of thing, is undoubtedly the master. He too tackles the striking-clock anachronism in *Julius Caesar,* suggesting not that this was Shakespeare's way of commenting upon contemporary calendrical matters *à la* Sohmer, but rather investigating Roman time telling practices and positing a possible scenario in which such a reference would not be an anachronism. His account is notable for his admission that it may be sophistry. When sophistry is this much fun, however, there is little to quibble about. Over and over again, Sutherland's

essays make one wish to return to the texts to focus one's own attention on the puzzles. It is this, perhaps, which is missing from much contemporary literary criticism, focused as it is more upon politics than the texts. When the authors do turn to potentially political questions, such as the title piece or indeed, Cleopatra's status as a mother, their answers are concerned not with *judging* the characters from some a-historical perspective, but rather in assessing what is going on in the text. Their answers are such, however, that we are equally free to make our own literary–as well as political–judgments on the events at hand.

Both authors use current events and contemporary references to enliven their pieces. Indeed, in his piece of Cleopatra, Sutherland recontextualises the life of the Princess of Wales in such a way as to strip away some of the more hagiographic aspects of her biography, whilst nevertheless allowing the reader to come to his or her own conclusion on both this and the paralleled literary matters. Watts's skill in this area is less deft. He does, however, in his piece on Bottom, Titania, and Oberon, manage to work in a comparison of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and The Rolling Stones' *Honky Tonk Woman* (what contemporary discussion of cuckolding would be complete without a reference to Mick Jagger?). Nonetheless, it is still Sutherland's pieces in the collection which are most entertaining, accessible and lively. At times Watts finds himself bogged down in literary theory–references to Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*, the 'praxis of transformation' and 'feminism' would never appear in Sutherland's essays–something which serves to make Watts's pieces less accessible, and less enjoyable, regardless of one's level of learning.

Shakespeare's Mystery Play and *Henry V, War Criminal* then cover similar ground with differing results. Whereas the former is, at times, overstated and under-convincing, the latter is subtle and compelling. Nevertheless, both provide great inspiration to return to the texts they study, and to read them again with new eyes and new sensitivity. This is, perhaps, the highest compliment that could be paid to any work of literary criticism, especially in age when that discipline has been more concerned about telling us what to think rather than what we should read and why.