Damon, Pithias, Bacon and Bungay

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Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF TUDOR DRAMA
720pp. Oxford University Press. £95 (US $150).
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A moment towards the end of the late Elizabethan tragedy *Titus Andronicus* has often puzzled scholars. A Goth soldier discovers the villainous Aaron and his infant son, but in peculiar circumstances: "from our troops I strayed / To gaze upon a ruinous monastery". There, as he "earnestly did fix mine eye / Upon the wasted building", the Goth hears a child wail. *Titus Andronicus* is set in ancient Rome, and neither of its warring factions – Roman and Goth – is Christian. So why should the Goth soldier see a monastery, much less care about its ruinous state? Why include this fleeting, undeveloped reference to the effects of the Tudor Reformation? For Thomas Betteridge, whose essay on *Titus Andronicus* concludes *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, the reference to the monastery is part of the play's mediation of pre- and post-Reformation cultural materials, a tendency which comes through most strongly in its interaction with earlier Tudor theatrical forms. Shakespeare's tragedy, probably written in collaboration with George Peele, draws on the morality play and interlude in its presentation of Aaron, and derives some of its appalling power from its echoes of religious plays such as the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*; moreover, although Betteridge does not highlight this point, it exploits some of the techniques of the Senecan tragedies translated by the likes of Jasper Heywood. It is Janus-faced, looking back to earlier tradition and forward to the increasingly commercialized theatre of the 1590s.

Drama of the period between the accession of Henry VII in 1485 and the death of Elizabeth I in 1603 has been undergoing a thorough reassessment over the past twenty years, having benefited from the attention to detail and context paid by recent historicist criticism, from the determination of some scholars to look beyond the late Elizabethan theatre of Kyd, Lyly, Marlowe and Shakespeare, and from moves by both medievalists and early modernists to bridge the (often self-imposed) division between their areas of interest. As Betteridge and his fellow general editor, Greg Walker, argue forcefully in their introduction,

> There is no straightforward evolutionary story to be told about the drama of the long sixteenth century that does not simplify the evidence to the point of obfuscation: no teleology from medieval to Renaissance, from religious to secular, drab to golden age, or from the simple and didactic to the complex and exploratory, and no necessary link between catholicism, symbolism and allegory on the one hand, or protestantism, innovation, and interiority on the other.

By placing *Titus Andronicus* at the end of the book, Betteridge and Walker underline their desire to break down many of these teleologies, especially as *Titus* is – perhaps unfairly – few people's choice as the crown of Tudor dramatic achievement. Moreover, their project is clear in both the content of the individual essays and the overall structure of the volume. Rather than following a strict chronology, the handbook is divided into four sections organized by a combination of theme and genre: "Religious Drama", "Interludes and Comedies", "Entertainments, Masques, and Royal Entries", and "Histories and Political Dramas". Within these sections, essays are in rough chronological order, meaning that the story effectively starts anew at the start of each section. The thirty-eight essays each focus on an individual text, and some authors recur across sections: Shakespeare appears three times (with essays on *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *2 Henry VI*), and John Bale and Marlowe twice. Individual contributors have clearly been asked to think backwards and forwards from their individual text or author, and to consider the ways in which particular themes or forms loop and recur throughout the Tudor period.

This sense of a shared, revisionary project has been a characteristic of the Oxford Handbooks, perhaps as a result of their orientation towards scholars and graduate students, and it distinguishes them from similar projects such as Cambridge University Press's valuable Companions series, which generally seeks to provide a more objective overview of its selected topics for students and non-specialists. Some of the essays in this Oxford Handbook would be challenging even for graduate students, while others are more accessible – of the two essays on Marlowe, for instance, David Lawton's vigorously argued reappraisal of *Doctor Faustus* might confuse readers without a thorough knowledge of earlier criticism, whereas Janette Dillon's essay provides not only an insightful account of the *Tamburlaine* plays, but also a useful introduction to the late Elizabethan theatre industry.

Given the range of plays and interests represented here, readers will inevitably have their own highlights. I was particularly taken by the attention paid to the places, spaces and personnel associated with early performances of Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* and John Heywood's *Play of the Weather* in essays by Clare Wright and Pamela M. King respectively, and by the close attention to dramatic language and form in Jennifer Richards's essay on Richard Edwards's *Damon and Pithias*. Alice Hunt's reappraisal of the role of the dumbshow in Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* must be among the best essays yet written on this hugely important but almost equally challenging play. The same might also be said of Sarah Knight's excellent piece on Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, which unpicks the multi-layered relationships that Greene deftly establishes between the court and the university, and between the urban and the rural, and Philip Schwyzer's account of Bale's *King Johan*, which successfully invokes some of the bracing oddity of that play's attack on received chronicle history. As a block of mutually informative essays, Part 4, "Histories and Political Dramas", works exceptionally well, tracing a close set of concerns from *The Interlude of Youth* and *Hick Scorner* to *Arden of Faversham* and *Titus Andronicus*, via Skelton's *Magnificence*, *King Johan*, *Respublica*, Jasper Heywood's translation of Seneca's *Thyestes*, *Gorboduc*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Tamburlaine*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and Shakespeare's *Henry VI*.

In a work of this length, and with this number of contributors, there is inevitably some unevenness. Some writers handle the need to summarize the plots of lesser-known plays, or to provide critical context, more efficiently than others. The volume also suffers from some poor proofreading and copy-editing, one contributor's name appearing in two different spellings within the footnotes to the same essay. The decision to focus on one play per essay means that the selected plays are explored in depth, but it necessarily involves some losses; John Lyly, in particular, feels under-represented with just a single essay on *Endymion*, albeit a very good one by Leah Scragg, and the section on entertainments, masques and royal entries unavoidably feels selective in its focus. The very end of the Tudor period is neglected, as no plays from the last decade of Elizabeth's reign feature. Writers such as Jonson, Heywood, Dekker, Chapman and Marston are perhaps well represented by other collections on early modern drama, but plays such as *An Humorous Day's Mirth*, *Every Man in his Humour*, *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge* are just as "Tudor" as their precursors. These caveats should not, however, detract from the overall achievement of this stimulating and provocative book, or the impact that it deserves to have on this fast-developing field of study.

A clock wakes Brutus

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith

30 GREAT MYTHS ABOUT SHAKESPEARE
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Paperback, £14.99 (US $24.95).
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It is nearing the end of a drunken night in St Petersburg, and the self-important speaker in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) is listening to the conversations between his companions. His internal monologue tells us: "finally [they] came to the conclusion that Shakespeare was immortal". Have they deified Shakespeare the man or do they mean that Shakespeare's *work* is immortal?

No other writer pervades time and the world as much as Shakespeare – and as a consequence, myths about him and his work are told and retold, especially when the facts are uncertain. Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith's *30 Great Myths About Shakespeare* is a thought-provoking myth-buster. Rather than delivering conclusions, in the vein of Stanley Wells's *Is It True What They Say about Shakespeare?*, which Maguire and Smith acknowledge as an inspiration, their book is unafraid to stimulate more questions, "so you can decide for yourself". The prompt is unusually liberating. When it comes to the myth about authorship, where positions are "most entrenched", they present evidence on both sides: "we can't work through all the arguments and all the candidates, but we can try to set out why and how this controversy has arisen". Choosing to place this myth last, even though it is currently a burning issue, epitomizes their alternative approach (the debate is also cleverly tackled throughout the book via other myths).

"Surely there is nothing new to be said about Shakespeare?", Maguire and Smith ask, considering the thousands of publications that appear every year. Yet their book stands out. It entertains the reader with new material and detective-like connections.

> We are more comfortable at pointing out contradictions and gaps; we have become adept at dealing with sums that don't add up. This enables us to consider negative evidence: for instance, why did Shakespeare not write religious poetry? Important research often begins with changing the kinds of questions that we ask.

Myth 3 ("Shakespeare's plays should be performed in Elizabethan dress") explains how Elizabethan costumes mixed the contemporary and the historical, and reveals anachronisms in Shakespeare's props and language – how, in *Julius Caesar*, a striking clock awakens Brutus, who, despite being an "inhabitant of a scroll culture, sees 'the leaf turned down / Where I left reading'". If Shakespeare's plays are rooted in the present, they argue, we should perform his plays in our present, so "whether we clothe the actors in modern dress or Elizabethan costume makes little difference".

An informal style, peppered with humour, makes the book fun and accessible. Questioning whether iambic pentameter is really a literary device, they show how it can appear in everyday speech with the example "'a skinny cappuccino, please, to go' (us, in Starbucks)". The book is aimed at students and general Shakespeare readers, and tries "not to get too snagged in a web of references", so often the downfall of academic prose. Each myth is the length of a standard undergraduate essay or newspaper article (about 2,000–2,500 words), and so the book wonderfully demonstrates how to formulate arguments in a certain format. The authors provide a "further reading" chapter at the back, "in narrative form", to "give a sense of the content of the books" and clarify why they have recommended them – simply listing book titles would have been an inadequate end to their comprehensible Shakespeare manual. A huge amount of research, work and selection lies behind this book, and it pays off. Not just students, but every academic should take note.