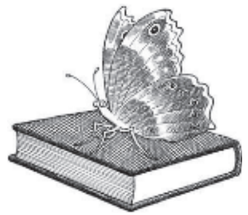


Shakespeare

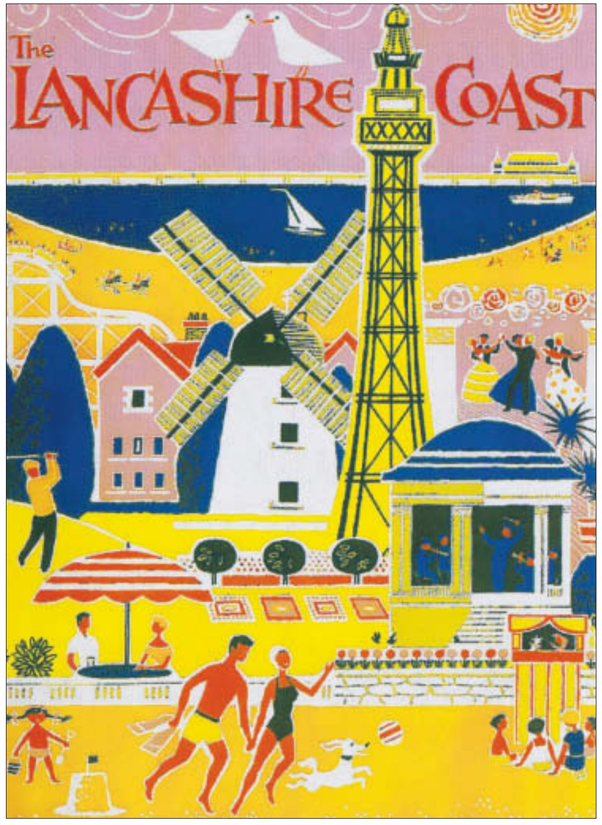
Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper and Peter Holland, editors
MEDIEVAL SHAKESPEARE
Pasts and presents
278pp. Cambridge University Press. £60.
978 1 107 01627 9

"Overcast with darke clouds, or rather thicke fogges of ignorance" was how William Camden described his country's "midle age" (a phrase he coined in *Remains Concerning Britain*, 1605). He was identifying a sorry time between Classical writing and the age of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare. Despite the Middle Ages' "uncouth" nature, however, Camden went on to say that "every little sparke of liberall learning seemed wonderful". *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and presents* proves that much of Shakespeare's work is indebted to these sparky medieval ideas even though, for us, he signals modernity. As Helen Cooper writes in the introduction, this collection of essays differs from past studies of Shakespeare and medieval culture because the contributors work "on both sides of that artificial and invisible boundary between the medieval and the Early Modern, across the whole culture in which Shakespeare operated".

There is a lively essay from Tom Bishop on how Shakespeare responds to the habit and history of "playing" in late medieval and Early Modern theatre. "Play itself, as one of the central things we do, is under comic scrutiny" in Shakespeare's work, especially with the constant "palimpsesting of boy-girl-boy-girl identifications". An interesting essay comes from A. E. B. Coldiron, about the conditions and effects of early printing. Coldiron points out that as the printers were expanding their book lists with foreign and reprinted materials, "every textual version is an interpretation, and the variety of available medieval versions facilitated the richness of Shakespeare's own versions of the past(s)". But the best essay in this book is devoted to graphic gore. Michael O'Donnell argues that Shakespeare's complex use of blood is inherited from the English mystery plays, where its appearance carried a nuanced, emotional impact and significance. When Christ appears to Thomas in N-Town, for example, he instructs Thomas to put his whole hand deep into his wounded side. On the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages, it was realistic blood, "never, so far as can be determined, simply stylized". Stage directions from the late 1500s indicate leather bags of animal blood – Thomas Preston's *Cambyses* (1560s) speaks of "a little bladder of Vinegar prikt".

Lapses in style sometimes mar the persuasiveness of arguments ("I refuse to swallow in a single gulp the sugar-coated pill that . . .") and abstract musings can meander around the crux. Nonetheless, this collection offers a fascinating dialogue between two literary periods.

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL



A British Railways poster from the 1960s, by Daphne Padden; From *Poster to Poster: Railway journeys in art – Vol. 6: The British North West* by Richard Furness (256pp. JDF & Associates Ltd. £39. 978 0 9562092 2 1)

Literary Criticism

James Phelan
READING THE AMERICAN NOVEL, 1920–2010
278pp. Wiley-Blackwell. £60.
978 0 631 23067 0

A work that attempts to define the principles for reading the American novel invites hubris, as James Phelan acknowledges in *Reading the American Novel: 1920–2010*; but, as he has shown in this clearly written and thoughtful book, it can be done without. Steering away from the trend in literary criticism that emphasizes the importance of historical context on an author's narrative project, Phelan has created an "inside-out" model for reading the American (or, in fact, any) novel.

Phelan's method of what he calls "rhetorical reading" is a productive one. Certainly, there is nothing original in the idea that "the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly engagements . . . lead to a particular thematic, affective, and ethical effect on the audience"; but, with a careful and focused approach, Phelan lays out a set of tools for analysing narrative form, which he deftly uses to disentangle the "raw material" of a range of novels – that is, the "events, characters, setting and other building blocks of the narrative" – and their treatment by their respective authors. Particularly interesting are his analyses of the multiple layers of narration that construct and enliven narratives. With great skill, he considers the relationship between these layers, producing a range of nuanced readings.

The focus on the craft of novels means that disparate works are examined alongside one another; "juxtaposing [Ralph Ellison's] *Invisible Man* with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*", for example, "underscores the remarkable diversity of the American novel". Certainly the novels studied are heterogeneous – including Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Zora Neale's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) – which provides a fine opportunity to draw links. But Phelan's chronologically arranged, chapter-length close readings of individual works lack any sustained examination of shared and evolving narrative features and techniques. A conclusion would be the appropriate space in which to examine these; but he does not provide one. *Reading the American Novel, 1910–2010* is, nevertheless, a stimulating book that offers some original readings of a selection of well-known novels, confirming their continuing importance in the American canon.

EMILY BUENO

Scottish literature

Rhiannon Purdie, editor
SHORTER SCOTTISH MEDIEVAL ROMANCES
'Florimond of Albany', 'Sir Colling the Knycht', 'King Orphius', 'Roswall and Lillian'
302pp. Scottish Text Society. £40 (US $70).
978 1 897976 36 4

Medieval Scottish texts are ripe for exploration. While the giants of Middle Scots literature – poets such as Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas and their ilk – have long received scholarly attention, numerous anonymously authored texts and fragments continue to await discovery and close investigation. Rhiannon Purdie's new edition of four Scottish medieval romances makes available texts that were virtually unknown to modern readers until their rediscovery in the National Archives of Scotland towards the end of the twentieth century. Although only *Sir Colling the Knycht* (written in the fifteenth or sixteenth century) and the sixteenth-century romance *Roswall and Lillian* survive in their entirety (the latter in both long and short versions, presented in parallel in this edition), all four of these verse romances have important links with both Continental and insular romance, not to mention folk tales and ballads. Comparative studies of *King Orphius* (written in the late fifteenth century) and the Middle English lay *Sir Orfeo* have already been undertaken, and the fifteenth-century *Florimond of Albany* is a very close translation of a twelfth-century Old French romance. At least one of the texts, *Sir Colling*, is a window onto not only manuscript and print culture, but also oral culture: Purdie hails the poem as "an important illustrative example of how ballads can circulate orally and invisibly for centuries before resurfacing in written form".

Purdie's scholarly edition is accompanied by a comprehensive glossary and substantial explanatory notes. Although the order of Purdie's introduction is occasionally hard to follow, she includes detailed accounts of the dating of each text, as well as descriptions of the manuscripts and early print volumes that served as the base texts for each edition. The only thing missing is broader context at the start: although different sections offer helpful summaries of links between these texts and other, more well-known works, an opening section situating these four works within both the Scottish canon and the romance tradition would be helpful. But this is the kind of work that will quickly be undertaken by the readers of Rhiannon Purdie's edition, which is sure to inspire new studies of four romances that have been overlooked for far too long.

MARY C. FLANNERY

Essays

Michael Jackson
THE OTHER SHORE
Essays on writers and writing
218pp. University of California Press.
£19.95 (US $63).
978 0 520 27526 3

In *The Other Shore*, Michael Jackson considers how Henry Miller, in writing about the books which meant most to him, created "an oblique memoir". The same might be said of Jackson's own enterprise, which incorporates references to a long and eclectic list of authors – from Hans Christian Andersen to Martin Heidegger – seamlessly woven together with snatches of autobiography. Jackson's career has consisted not only of writing poetry but also of ethnographical research, so history and anthropology are likewise intertwined with the personal, and oral storytelling traditions from a variety of global cultures are incorporated into Jackson's personal canon of defining narratives.

His own writing style is careful and reflective; despite occasional lengthy sentences and a profusion of source material which is sometimes distracting, the sense and focus remain equally sharp. This is a meticulously structured book, its twenty-seven chapters of reflection developing from one another both thematically and personally. Each one offers a new angle, subtly distinct from the last, on the nature of writing and its relationship with lived experience. As the title indicates, there is a recurring interest in the way writing creates a bridge to the unknowable, but the tone is anything but didactic. Early on, we find ourselves, with the young Jackson, in the Congo (where he feels kinship with Joseph Conrad's "restive characters" and ponders what might be found on Rimbaud's desolate "red road"); we follow him to Paris, Menton, London, Sierra Leone, Venice, Rome, Wellington and finally New York (where an ambiguous Cézanne painting, considered alongside the poetry of Wallace Stevens, reveals the "perennial oscillation" of humanity whereby "we are always in two minds"). The essays touch on phenomenology, genocide, technology, exile. Along the way we also learn of the births of Jackson's children, of his first wife's death and his remarriage, of his developing career as an academic.

These are discreet glimpses, however, placed within an intertextual network of thoughts which creates its own kind of narrative tension. Just as *The Other Shore* withholds autobiographical intimacy, it also refuses to grant a sense of intellectual completion. Rather, it revels in the multiple ways in which language – and life – may be both written and read.

LUCY CARLYLE

Philosophy

Thomas E. Wartenberg
A SNEETCH IS A SNEETCH
And other philosophical discoveries – Finding wisdom in children's literature
176pp. Wiley-Blackwell. Paperback, £12.99.
978 0 47 065683 9

The reference to children's literature in the subtitle of Thomas E. Wartenberg's book may bring to mind J. K. Rowling's philosophically rich Harry Potter series, or Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, but Wartenberg is interested in introducing an even younger audience to philosophy. His research takes in books such as Dr Seuss's *The Sneetches* (whence he draws his title) and other classic American illustrated books: *The Important Book* (1949), *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955), *Shrek!* (1990) and *Knuffle Bunny* (2004).

In a previous book, *Big Ideas For Little Kids* (2009), Wartenberg outlined his method for doing philosophy with children using picture books. The new book takes a step back to focus on the introductory aspect of this with the aim of stimulating further dialogue between parents and their children. At the end of each chapter is a short "Discussing X with Children" section; it is a shame not to find more reference to Wartenberg's own extensive work with children here. In the chapter about *The Sneetches*, for example, the philosophy around which relates to questions about discrimination, one can imagine children challenging his dismissal of the claim that "members of the discriminated-against group are inferior to members of the discriminating group". ("But boys are better than girls at catching and running" is a caveat many working in education will have heard but which experience shows children to be perfectly capable of qualifying: I recall one girl's response that, "even if that's true, it doesn't mean that girls should be treated differently".) The comments and insights Wartenberg must have encountered on the field would have reassured, contextualized and entertained any parent wishing to philosophize at home. In spite of its brevity (and the lack of elaboration this seems to have encouraged), *A Sneetch Is a Sneetch* is a fine companion for children ready to explore the deeper layers, easily missed, of these deceptively simple stories. The parent too stands to gain fresh enjoyment of books that are all too often used simply to put children to sleep.

PETER WORLEY

Travel

Tom Chesshyre
A TOURIST IN THE ARAB SPRING
256pp. Bradt Travel Guides. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 84162 475 4

A Western writer of a Middle Eastern travelogue must navigate between two extremes. The first is that of the sanctimonious narrator; never judging, never labelling – which can make for a boring book. The second is that of the cartoonist, who populates his narrative with zany taxi drivers, speakers of Pidgin English, incompetent militias, sex-crazed, chain-smoking men, and such like. This generally yields a rather more offensive book.

Neither approach is accurate, so, in writing *A Tourist in the Arab Spring*, Tom Chesshyre has taken on quite a challenge. In 2011, the year after the revolutionary movements had started to spread through the Arab World, Chesshyre journeyed from Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, across a Libya since infested with militia, to Egypt, also untroubled by fighting at the time. He wanted to see what the tourist experience was like a year on from the Arab Spring. Pretty tough, is the answer.

The question remains, though: what purpose does this book really serve? Chesshyre is a charming travel companion, entertaining and engaging, and he talks to some interesting people along the way – including a Libyan man, who was tortured under Gaddafi, and a relative of Mohamed Bouazizi (the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in a protest widely understood as a trigger for the Arab Spring). But he is neither an expert on the Arab world (he does not speak Arabic) nor on the monuments he sees. The book sits uneasily as a Bill Bryson-esque romp through North Africa; when asked about writing a book on the region, Bryson himself was cautious – "I have a problem writing my kind of book about third world countries". It's easier to laugh at the better off. Chesshyre's account, too, holds back, never really letting rip. Proof, no doubt, of the limits of the tourist experience.

RAPHAEL CORMACK

David Whittaker, editor
MOST GLORIOUS AND PEERLESS VENICE
Observations of Thomas Coryate (1608)
128pp. Wavestone Press. Paperback, £10.
978 0 9545194 7 6

Coryate's Crudities Hastily gobbled up in Five Moneths travels . . . ; Newly digested in the hungry aire of Odcombe in the County of Somerset and now dispersed to the nourishment of the travelling members of this Kingdome was published, its title given in full, in 1611. Its cheerfully eccentric author, the son of Odcombe's vicar, having completed an astounding 1,975-mile walk across Europe, hung up his shoes in the parish church and embarked on one of the most richly enjoyable of English travel narratives, mixing wonder, inquisitiveness and vulnerability in equal portions.

The journey's climax was Coryate's six-week sojourn in Venice during the summer of 1608. Though the city's economic and political decline, as capital of a maritime republic, had begun a century earlier, it remained "so beautiful, so renowned, so glorious a virgin", the most populous and handsomely equipped metropolis in Christendom. Coryate acknowledged the challenges of writing an adequate description of Venice and his account is the more captivating for its continuing sense of open-mouthed astonishment. Saint Mark's Basilica is "sumptuous", "stately", "glorious", the Doge's Palace is "the beautifullest I ever saw", with "sundry delicate pictures" and "marvellous abundance of armour", while the Piazza outside has "the greatest magnificence of architecture to be seen that any place under the sun doth yield".

Awestruck and wide-eyed Coryate may have been, but he was also irrepressibly curious. Early readers of the *Crudities* included John Donne, who called him "thou great Lunatic", and Ben Jonson, who praised him as "a bold carpenter of words" and enjoyed accounts of his visit to the Ghetto, where he sought to convert a rabbi to Christianity, and of his evening with one of Venice's famously accomplished courtesans, complete with red camlet petticoat, carnation silk stockings and "her breath and whole body most fragrantly perfumed".

Until now Coryate's trip to Venice has only been accessible in the two complete editions of the *Crudities*, the Jacobean original and MacLehose's two-volume reissue from 1905. David Whittaker's presentation of the footloose Odcombian's Venetian rhapsody, generously illustrated and with modern spelling, is essential reading for those following him to the peerless city.

JONATHAN KEATES

Religion

Reza Aslan
ZEALOT
The life and times of Jesus of Nazareth
336pp. Westbourne Press. £17.99.
978 1 908906 27 4
US: Random House. $27.
978 1 4000 6922 4

An acclaimed author in the United States, Reza Aslan was born in Iran and raised as a Muslim, but was attracted to Christianity as a teenager. His theological studies taught him that the evangelicalism he had imbibed was incompatible with a historically informed approach to the Bible. The title of his new book shouts loud his conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact a Zealot, a view briefly championed in Britain in the 1950s by S. G. F. Brandon. The Zealots were an armed group, the force behind the unsuccessful Jewish Revolt that culminated in the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Aslan claims that after the suicide of the last remnants of the Zealots on Masada, the followers of Jesus astutely changed their tune, to depict Jesus as the messianic figure (corresponding to a different set of biblical prophecies) familiar from the New Testament. Such a figure could be presented as implying little threat to Roman rule, provided that one forgets the clash of first-century Christianity with Roman claims for divinity and lordship of the emperor.

After a sober curtain-raiser in which Aslan affirms his continued commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, the book develops in ways which seem to have the film rights or perhaps a musical in view. The Galilee of Jesus is vividly painted as a scene of anguished poverty and political turmoil, though in an unguarded moment the author admits that the region "enjoyed a period of peace and tranquillity" for the twenty years before Jesus' death. There are dramatic vignettes such as the assassination of the High Priest Jonathan in AD 56 as he steps out of the Holy of Holies in full vestments, and the final heroic moments of the Zealots besieged on Masada. The fast-moving narrative is confirmed by anachronistic comparison to historical characters or legal conditions of far-distant periods. A further air of authority is imparted to the riotous story by fifty pages of end-notes whose bibliographical references include a number of reputable sources.

No serious historian would deny that the Christian interpretation of Jesus' life is built into the gospel narratives in a way which often makes it difficult to discern the bare facts (if there are such things as bare facts) underlying the texts. The central focus of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed has been variously estimated. But Reza Aslan's fantastical reconstruction crumbles before any sober assessment.

HENRY WANSBROUGH, OSB