

What's the Worst Thing You Can Do to Shakespeare? Richard Burt and Julian Yates.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xii + 166 pp. \$28.

To judge by its cover, this book is a mess — a deliberately instructive one. Its visuals combine an eroded font as well as an ink-splattered Shakespeare signature and an Etch A Sketch incongruously displaying Shakespeare's Chandos portrait. The media mix embodies the authors' provocative approach: Shakespeare as "multimedia archive" — Latour's "iconoclasm" of time-spanning formats in material "substrates" of texts, media, and human "wetware." The Folio's "media launch" by Shakespeare's friends cannily initiated a fetish community around the "strategically imperfect" object's gaps, urging us to read "him" — book and man composite "bio-bibilion" — "again and again." The "worst" becomes not reading him, the condition defining the "unreadable" spaces made visible in adaptations. The study deconstructs dazzlingly, drawing readers into the brilliant, imitative high spirits of the authors' animated, collaborative anonymity; their playful preface even occludes which coauthor speaks. Chapter transitions imitate radio or telephone: *Hamlet's* ends with a "call coming through" from the next chapter's Juliet (45). Their introduction highlights foundational scholarship for their project: McCleod on unediting; de Grazia undoing *Hamlet's* post-romantic rebranding; Middleton's authorship now altering Shakespeare's "gravitational field"; Stallybrass's and Lesser's recovery of reading for *sententiae*, so that *Hamlet* was "never read"; Eagleton's apocalyptic "worst" — that Shakespeare must be destroyed before becoming readable again.

This sophisticated theorization, treating breathless boasts about some media's newness ironically, eschews techno-romance, preferring the humble telephone for unpacking *Hamlet*. Calling Horatio Hamlet's "answering machine" and *Hamlet* "a

telephone book” sounds glib, but such significance-accumulating conceits ramify into intriguing observations: Hamlet’s “many voices . . . always seem to be coming from elsewhere” (33), and his “to be” speech significantly used actual telephonic voices. Siding with Greg against Dover Wilson in refusing to “smooth out [editorial] puzzles” (14), they argue the dumb show’s unreadable singularity, unlike typical comparisons to the play within the play.

“*Romeo and Juliet* Is for Zombies” follows the play’s narrative more linearly than other chapters, thematizing the play’s “survival” and resuscitation of the dead through Derrida’s observation that the famous couple “survive one another.” Applying this to Nashe’s defense of theater in reviving English historical heroes for “successive hits of affect” (47), the play’s “media interruption” marks continual iteration, whether of media or even of love itself. Extended analysis, including time-synched, technical frame analysis, illuminates an extraordinary, classification-defying film: the three minute *Where Is My Romeo* (dir. Kiarostami), portraying an Iranian female audience, whose expressions respond to an offscreen filming of the suicide in Zeffirelli’s film. The strong reading of the play’s “equipment for dying” (73) only glances at the film’s global politics regarding the repression of women.

Political implications are more explicit in “Drown before Reading: Prospero’s Missing Book . . . s.” Here the authors engage productively with biopolitics and postcoloniality, juxtaposing the puzzling media-human metaphor of Prospero’s announced “book drowning” with Caliban’s, and history’s, book-burning schemes. Caliban’s approach constitutes “archival violence” and a rewriting of the “biopolitical quotient” on a different media platform (88), while Prospero’s sovereignty over the island’s Agambenian “state of exception” is finally altered by shifting his sovereign power: from letting die to letting live (91).

Their final chapter theorizes the anti-Stratfordian film *Anonymous*, cheekily offering to interpret it so we won’t have to see it. While this filmic attempt, labeled “Anony/mess,” fails unsurprisingly to demonstrate Oxford as true author, its very erasures, refusals to witness writing scenes, and linear time confusion render it theoretically instructive about the instability of Derridean archival “pastness.” The film’s Oxfordianism even shares with Stratfordians assumptions from detective fiction, differing only “on the narrow issue of who the real author is” (116). Having sought to “dwell in the blank spots unreadability discloses and covers over” (13–14), the authors might address whether their model of unreading describes Shakespeare the bookman’s own “media-specificity,” or whether, as they more radically claim, being itself is always already “technologized” (24) and “iteration is all there ever was or will be” (13).

To return to the cover, its studied mess can be further justified by the extended treatment of the current technical concept of “mess” in social science (11–15). If their messy images intend to spoof Shakespeare’s diffuse, multimedia archive, a back-cover note perpetuates further unfathomable unreadability, by attributing the cover design to an artist with the dubious name Will Speed.

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