The supposedly provocative title of this essay collection suggests a variety of possible readings. What exactly is a ‘Medieval Shakespeare’? Is the message that Shakespeare’s plays retain many traits of Medieval theatre or, even more broadly, traces of Medieval attitudes and values? Or that the object of study is Shakespeare’s treatment of Medieval themes, such as the War of the Roses? Or that the Renaissance nature of Shakespearean drama has been overestimated and he should be regarded as more of a Medieval author instead?

The actual contents of the book indicate that each author interprets the task in his or her own way; moreover, when Helen Cooper assumes two different roles – that of the editor and of a researcher writing the essay “The Afterlife of Personification”, – she behaves quite differently, and her interpretations of what ‘Medieval Shakespeare’ is differ vastly. As an essay-writer, she presents a piece of conventional research on the observable survivals of Medieval allegory in Shakespeare. As the editor, she is totally absorbed by the task of debunking the alleged myth of ‘Renaissance Shakespeare’ and putting the emphasis upon his Medieval nature instead (in the Preface).

Unfortunately, this intention to épater les bourgeois is both a little bit outdated – it would have certainly looked more enticing in early 1990s when the theory of ‘the long Middle Ages’ was still new and provoking, – and affecting the productivity of research, since some authors apparently understood the task of the book as squeezing Shakespeare into the frame of Mediaveality at any cost. Given the fact that many are not Medievalists in stricter sense, the results – not infrequently – appear disconcerting. The most obvious failure of this kind is, in my opinion, ‘King Lear in B.C. Albion’ by Margreta de Grazia (pp. 138-156; for some unexplained reason, King Lear is frequently referred to by the authors of the book, though its time setting is not Medieval). De Grazia seemingly understands the ‘Medievality’ of the play as its orientation towards Christian ethics and argues vigorously against those ‘modern or secular readings who assume that Christianity has no relevance to the play’ (p. 155; no examples of such readings are cited). Who exactly stated that Christianity has no relevance to the play (unless de Grazia means some militantly atheistic Soviet critics, which I doubt, given that their works have never been translated into Western languages)? And are ‘Christian’ and ‘Medieval’ synonyms? Did the Europeans suddenly ceased to be Christian or to understand Christian symbolism in the Renaissance era or in the 18th, or even in the 20th century? Graham Greene and G.K. Chesterton certainly would not agree. However, de Grazia steps into her own minefield by referring to the long-noticed resemblance between King Lear’s posture with the dead Cordelia and the religious image of Pietà. The fact is that Pietà only appeared in the 14th century and had not become popular all over Europe until the 15th; it was on the top of popularity in the 15th and 16th centuries, that is, in the period commonly identified by historians of visual arts as Renaissance. All four Pietàs in de Grazia’s own illustrations date either from the 15th or 16th century. This is indeed bad news for the theory of ‘Medieval Shakespeare’. Would not it be more fruitful to put Shakespeare into his own historical context and to explain what is special in both Pietà and King Lear – and why neither appeared, say, in the 12th century?

This ‘Renaissance denialism’, along with the lack of broader historical and cultural context, even interferes with presenting clear notions and terms. Thus, many authors seek to answer the question whether Shakespeare had the notion of ‘the Middle Ages’ or it would be the sin of anachronism to use it when describing Elizabethan views upon history; however, the dates of the alleged first occurrence of the term ‘Middle Age(s)’ in English differ vastly within the book, depending on the author, and even within a single paper conflicting dates can be offered – from 1570 to 1618 [Cooper: 1-2; Smith 22-23; van Es: 43-44 etc.]. The central issue is of course the
meaning of this word combination – whether it corresponded to our notion of ‘Medievality’. Most authors of the book are too ready to answer that no, it did not; Helen Cooper even claims that “the Middle Ages” did not exist as a concept in the sixteenth century [Cooper: 1]. However, the idea of an intermediate period between classical antiquity and contemporary era was first introduced by Petrarch [Vickers 2002: 75] and by the 15th century had been well-developed in Italy [Vickers, op. cit.: 75-76; Brown 2013: 7]; after all, the very term ‘Renaissance’ (rinascità) was coined by Giorgio Vasari in 1550, fourteen years before Shakespeare’s birth [Vickers: ibid.] As for the Latin term medium aevum, it was first introduced by Flavio Biondo (†1463) [Brown: ibid.] Are we actually expected to assume that the 16th-century England was isolated from the intellectual movements of Italy? To put it into a more informal way, are they kidding? The authors’ refusal to place England within this context suggests no plausible explanation other than over-indulgence in Renaissance denialism. Thus, the very way of posing the question creates a biased direction of research that deliberately ignores facts.

Another group of papers published in the collection is comprised by those that are well-researched and substantially evidence-based, but technically have little to do with the headline theme of the book. One of them is ‘Performing the Middle Ages’ by Peter Holland which provides valuable observations on representations of Middle Ages in modern productions of Shakespeare’s history plays. The challenges that today’s stage directors face and the choices they have to make against the modern background of historical knowledge are indeed of great interest, yet of little relevance to ‘Medieval Shakespeare’ in any of possible senses.

An even more obvious case is ‘Not Know My Voice? Shakespeare Corrected; English Perfected – Theories of Language from the Middle Ages to Modernity’ by Jonathan Hope. While the idea that Shakespeare was more oriented towards orality than towards the written text is perfectly valid from the philological perspective, its potential insight is reduced by Hope’s struggle to fit it into the subject of ‘Medieval Shakespeare’. What is so specifically Medieval about orality? One may suspect that, if the call for papers bore the heading Classical Shakespeare, Hope would with the same arguments present Shakespeare’s oral-oriented language as an homage to classical antiquity – after all, the importance of oral narrative for Roman historians has been long noticed (see, for instance, [Potter 1999: 118]). It is yet less clear why Tom Bishop’s ‘The Art of Playing’ was placed in the collection. Valuable as it is, the paper is about the practice of performance in Elizabethan theatre and possible hidden stage remarks in Shakespeare. The only link to the subject of Medievality is the comparison between Shakespeare’s plays and some earlier mystery or morality plays. However, no reason is given why Shakespeare’s texts are to be compared with these specific mystery plays, and why they are to be compared with mystery plays at all (presumably, Shakespeare’s contemporaries would also use hidden remarks, and if they did not, this would need explanation why).

As a result, most authors who bona fide took up the challenge of writing on the ‘Medieval Shakespeare’ have rather vague ideas of what exactly ‘Medievality’ is and how it is – or is not – manifested. Thus, ‘Medievality’ becomes an umbrella concept for any trace of traditionalism or conservatism characteristic of pre-Romantic culture.

Against this background, two essays in the book stand out that deserve most attention: ‘Blood Begetting Blood: Shakespeare and the Mysteries’ by Michael O’Connell and ‘From Scaffold to Discovery-Space: Change and Continuity’ by Janett Dillon. O’Connell presents a study of representations of violence in the stage productions of Shakespeare’s lifetime. While no direct evidence is preserved, O’Connell ingeniously employs documentary records of mystery plays and passion pageants, which allows him to convincingly reconstruct stage interpretations of violence in the Globe. Any modern reader who is used to stock anecdotes about inscribed boards saying ‘sea’ or ‘wilderness’ will indeed be amazed – and have fun – to hear about a close-fitting leather costume with hidden pockets of blood, worn by an actor who performed the role of Jesus on the cross (p. 183).
Dillon’s work covers the history of stage space and various kinds of structures allowing to conceal or to disclose actors at specific moments. Thus, a well-defined issue and well-sourced research is what guarantees success, although the latter observation is hardly non-trivial.

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