Book Review

Richard Dutton. *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 321 pp. Hb. £ 40.00. ISBN: 978-0-1987-7774-8.

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The 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016 has once again made it abundantly clear that the Shakespeare of the twenty-first century has as many different faces as there are people and groups reading, staging, and watching his plays. That is how an English playwright's work can form the basis for a production with deeply postcolonial themes, and it is how a man of the sixteenth and seventeenth century can become a proto-feminist: through interpreting his work, Shakespeare can be whoever we want him to be. One of the images that has persisted for a long time is of course that of Shakespeare as a man of the masses, a writer for the groundlings at the Globe rather than the aristocrats at the court.

In *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*, Richard Dutton argues that the court of Elizabeth I and James I respectively not only had an influence on Shakespeare's writing process but that this influence is in no small part responsible for those versions of some plays we are most familiar with today. At the heart of Dutton's research lies the hypothesis that Shakespeare regularly revised and adjusted his plays specifically for performance at (and at the request of) the court. This of course is highly relevant to anyone who is interested at all in the different versions that survive of the plays in Quarto and Folio form: Dutton's argument is that these differences are at least not entirely the product of edits by actors, stenographers, or printers during the publication process. Rather, the author himself made very conscious edits to his plays even after they had been performed publicly for a while – for example to prepare them for a performance at court. Dutton focuses not on small changes that might well have occurred during a print run, but rather substantial differences, especially significant changes in length.

Dutton collects evidence for his hypothesis through a mix of theatre history, editorial theory, and literary analysis. To combine these different approaches, his book is split into two parts of similar length. The first part provides historical background on performance and production conditions, such as the institution of aristocratic patronage, the development of theatre both in the City of London and at the court, general duration of performances (and indicators thereof) in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and the process of revisions at the time. The second part then builds on this insight into the historical structures and offers a detailed analysis of versions of some of Shakespeare's texts (*Henry V*, *2* and *3 Henry VI*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and shorter excerpts from other plays).

The person at court that Shakespeare and other playwrights and actors would have had their business dealings with was the Master of the Revels. By outlining the responsibilities and qualifications of the two Masters active during Shakespeare's time – Edmund Tilney and Sir George Buc – Dutton paints a picture of the Master of the Revels not as merely a staunch businessman and censor, but as a theatre expert with a vested interest in the quality of the entertainment that he brought to the court.

Dutton describes the Master of the Revels as a crucial part of a proto-capitalist gift-exchange culture that worked to the mutual benefit of all parties involved. The acting troupes would not be allowed to play at all without the patronage of aristocrats, who in turn had reputations to build and favour with the Queen (and later King) to gain. The Master of the Revels, who oversaw entertainment during those long, dark, cold winter months, had both an economic and a professional interest in bringing the best plays and players to the court – where the aristocrats would have benefitted from having their men perform for the monarch. The

only group excluded from this arrangement were the City of London authorities and others critical of the institution of the theatre – and the favour of the court provided acting companies with protection against such detractors and their proposed regulations.

The popular argument suggests that Shakespeare wrote primarily for the public audience at the Globe – if not for ideological, then for economic reasons, as public performances certainly provided the bulk of the company's income. Dutton meanwhile argues that while the court may not have been directly financially more viable, it had a far higher structural relevance for Renaissance theatre, which Shakespeare would have well been aware of. Without the court, no acting troupe at the time would have been able to establish a permanent residence at a London theatre, and certainly no company would have flourished as the Lord Chamberlain's Men or the Admiral's Men did.

Interestingly, Dutton proposes that Shakespeare's plays were not written as long pieces (e.g. to be read) and then cut to be performed in public, but rather that Shakespeare might have written short plays for the Globe and – after he'd had some success with them – added to them and expanded them for performance at the court in accordance with the requirements set by the Master of the Revels. At court, he would have not been bound by the same restrictions as in a public setting; there certainly would have been less of a time constraint.

In the second part of his book, Dutton meticulously analyses passages from different plays and compares 'good' versions to 'bad' Quartos to produce evidence for his hypotheses. He does so very convincingly, and even though at times the two parts of his book read like two separate works – one on performance conditions in early modern England, one a guide for editors of Shakespeare's plays – Dutton's argument is clear and coherent throughout, and he manages to tie his various lines of evidence together in a very precise conclusion.

Dutton's academic background makes him ideally suited for this kind of interdisciplinary approach. Not only has he published on the theatre world in the context of early modern England both as an author and as an editor before, he has also done extensive previous research on the role of the Master of the Revels (*Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama*, 1991). It is chiefly the latter that inspired him to look more closely into how the relationship between the court and Renaissance drama influenced Shakespeare's work.

This root of his original interest shows: in the first half of *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*, Dutton writes about Tilney and Buc with far more detail than would be expected or required of a book on Shakespeare's work. Dutton is thorough almost to a fault, covering potential gaps or pitfalls before they ever come up.

Frequently, he sidetracks into excursions on the income structure of the Master of the Revels, the performance frequency of boy choirs and children's companies, pre-Elizabethan Revels customs, and other tangentially related subjects. When he does not offer ample information himself, he supplies a multitude of references in his footnotes.

The only potential criticism that might be levelled at Dutton's work is the question of his target audience. If his hope for his text is, as he states in the introduction, that "general readers can understand, not just experts" (8), he will likely lose some of those general readers along the way. Someone who is not yet familiar with Renaissance England on an advanced academic level might find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of detail Dutton provides – particularly when it is not directly related to his main argument. If Dutton wished to write for a broader academic audience, he could have streamlined his text more and omitted at least a few of his detours. This is also most definitively not, as the title might suggest, a book about Shakespeare's role at the court, but rather about the role that the court played in Shakespeare's work.

Any interested academic with a background in Renaissance drama and history, and some insight into the process of editing Shakespeare's work, however, will find a fascinating wealth of useful information in Dutton's detours, particularly due to the precision with which he presents his findings. Dutton clearly has a very detailed knowledge not only of his primary sources – accounts of the Masters of the Revels (in as far as they survive today), Philip Henslowe's *Diary*, as well as policies, orders, letters, and other contemporary texts – but also of any research into Shakespeare's production conditions from the past century up to today.

His references certainly present a comprehensive list of relevant scholarship, but where Dutton excels is at how he discusses theories and hypotheses introduced in other research. He embeds his own work firmly in the academic tradition and current debates in his field, but he is also very aware of where he disagrees with others – and he never shies away from doing so, though always in a thoroughly respectful manner. One of the reasons why we can so easily appropriate Shakespeare and attribute characteristics to him is that we have so few hard facts about his life. One of Dutton's most important sources, Tilney's accounts, is missing for a crucial period between 1597 and 1603, and the same holds true for other historical documents and artefacts. Dutton knows that he has no hard proof for his theory – but neither do the others. His approach is that there are many plausible hypotheses, but that he finds the one for which he argues the most convincing. And while he can offer no proof, no "smoking gun" (6), he provides plenty of compelling, if circumstantial evidence.

The reason why Dutton has to differentiate his own work from previous debates and proposed solutions by other scholars so strictly, such as Andrew

Gurr's suggestion that Shakespeare's plays were too long to be performed and had to be cut, or Paul Menzer's and James Marino's supposition that the texts were significantly expanded by the performing actors, is that several facets of his hypothesis are quite provocative; Dutton himself predicts they will be regarded as "heretical in some quarters" (6). His argument may be regarded as heretical, but it is equally seductive for the same reasons: if Shakespeare revised his own plays for court performances, and if that is a substantial reason for some of the major differences between surviving versions of his plays, then that means there is no one true, definitive text to be gleaned from the various prints. If they are all Shakespeare's plays, then they might coexist on an equal level – different versions for different audiences. It will certainly be interesting to see what future editors of Shakespeare's plays make of Dutton's hypothesis and the information he provides.