

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Greg Doran, *My Shakespeare: A Director's Journey through the First Folio* (London: Methuen, 2023). 362pp. 30 illustrations. ISBN 978-1-3503-3019-1.

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This memoir comes a year after the announcement that Greg Doran was stepping down as Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, thirty-five years after he first joined as an actor. It charts his relationship with Shakespeare from his initial contact as a Lancashire schoolboy through his student days in Bristol and into that celebrated professional career. As Marvell might have acknowledged, ‘Much to the man is due’. This book is full of fascinating insights and anecdotes, some of which I shall touch on below: Doran can justifiably claim this book as ‘His’ Shakespeare.

Let’s start with the positive aspects of the book. Its thirty-six chapters review the Shakespeare plays which Doran has directed in chronological order from his student days until 2022: it does not follow the order of the plays in the First Folio, nor the order in which the plays were written. There are many amusing anecdotes and reminiscences: for example, I had not known of Duke Ellington’s Shakespeare suite (p. 59), and had almost forgotten the penchant which G. Wilson Knight had for taking off his clothes when declaiming *Timon* (p. 58), as he attempted to do in front of my bemused students in the early 1980s. Doran’s comment on *Exit, pursued by bear* is apposite: the real problem is bringing the bear on in the first place (p. 51). It was also good to be reminded that the longest play in the First Folio is *Richard III* (p. 330).

Doran is very willing to take us behind the scenes: he reveals how one particular moment, the shattering of the mirror in the ‘closet scene’ (3.4), was contrived and staged in his 2008 production of *Hamlet* (p. 185) and writes extensively on techniques he has learned to help actors open up the text. However, as he himself admits (p. 2), the textual work he explores in most detail, and which both opens and closes the book, is based on a section from *Romeo and Juliet* which is not included in the First Folio. When discussing his production of *The Winter’s Tale*, he acknowledges when decisions about

doubling worked (p. 53) and when they did not (p. 48). The chapter on *Twelfth Night* includes an illuminating study of the change from verse to prose, whilst there is a similarly intelligent discussion of the significance of the pronouns 'you' and 'thou' in the chapter on *The Taming of the Shrew* — although that discussion draws upon material not found in the First Folio.

The chapters are uneven in length, and Doran sometimes feels the need to include summaries of the plots of the plays and sometimes not: the brevity of the chapters on his most recent productions might well result from the pain of the bereavements which he suffered while planning them, for this is a personal as well as a professional memoir, which does not shy away from disappointment or from grief.

The main problem lies in the subtitle of the book: 2023 was the 400th anniversary of the First Folio, but the allusion to that volume in the title of this book is very tenuous indeed. The subtitle suggests a rationale and a methodology for this text which is not present in the finished work. At the time of writing this book, Doran had not directed *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *Cymbeline* (the last of the chapters is a sketch for a production of the latter, eventually staged in the spring of 2023, but not even cast when the book went to press). He has yet to direct *Pericles* (the fact that this was not included in the First Folio gives him a get-out clause of sorts) and his acquaintance with *The Merry Wives* was with a musical version (a dreadful flop) and not with Shakespeare's play. Moreover, *Venus and Adonis* is included in this memoir, despite not being found in the First Folio at all. A more severe reviewer might note that the only production of *Romeo and Juliet* which Doran seems to have directed was not a professional production at all but a student version at Bristol: that severe reviewer would, however, also have to note that the persuasive young Doran proved adept at securing significant sponsorship even at that early stage in his career.

You will search in vain to find either Heminges or Condell in the Index for this book, and when there are references to the First Folio, they are often memories of times when Doran found that text to be wanting and to be ignored (which he did in the cases of *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*). The most egregious misuse of the First Folio, however, comes in the discussion of *Henry IV Part Two* when we are told that, at the end of 2.4, 'the Folio adds an unusual stage direction: *She comes blubbered*. It is very rare for a stage direction to indicate an emotional state, but here surely is one' (p. 249). Actually, there surely is not: these words do not come from the Folio text but from the Quarto of 1600, where they are not a stage direction but part of a speech from the Hostess.

The book deserved a better editor. Phrases like, ‘Meanwhile, The Other Place closed its doors as an operating theatre’ (p. 87) cry out for amendment, whilst a comment on the Swan Theatre is repeated almost word for word in separate chapters. More egregiously, the comment, ‘There are, of course, double the sets of twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, but none of them know of the other’s existence, so they feel no pain in their separation’ (p. 204) is simply wrong, as the most cursory reading of the play's second scene would reveal.

Similarly, in a book which sets the productions of the plays against their political and historical contexts, it is unfortunate that an anecdote about Peter Mandelson (p. 20) has him campaigning in Sunderland: that campaign was in my hometown of Hartlepool.

In conclusion, there is a great deal in this book which will entertain and inform the general reader, especially the reader willing to overlook its shortcomings, or, better still, the reader who neither knows nor cares about the First Folio.