

# Reviews

## The Influence of the Italian Renaissance

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### Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time

by Louise George Clubb. Yale UP, 1989.

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While the stated purpose of *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* is to supply "a picture of Italian drama as Shakespeare might have seen it" (ix), its underlying achievement is to demonstrate—to those of us who always regarded Italian Renaissance plays as convention-bound imitations of classical theatre forms—that the dramatic literature of the Cinquecento derived from conscious experimentation with genre and thus exhibited greater originality and relevance to its time and place than has hitherto been acknowledged. In sections devoted to comedy, pastoral, tragedy, and even *commedia dell'arte*, Clubb elaborates "the simultaneous search for Aristotelian regularity and for mixed structures not in Aristotle's canon, for 'perfect' Sophoclean structure that could represent invisible realities and express contemporary ideology" (250). Although the Shakespearean connection at times seems to be superimposed, as if added as an afterthought, those comments provide an important context for understanding certain formal aspects of Shakespeare's craft.

Major obstacles to appreciation of Clubb's distinguished scholarship are encountered in the book's first paragraph, and therefore must be addressed up front. That the book is pitched to her fellow scholars specializing in the Italian Renaissance is evident in the opening reference to the implicit aims of "Herrick and Lea" (ix). After searching in vain for a bibliography of secondary sources, one turns to the index, which directs the reader to footnotes on pages 12 and 52 respectively. The bibliographical citation for Herrick is complete, but one discovers Lea's complete citation only on pages 51 (not given in the index) and on 249. Granted, the seminal works of Herrick and Lea are already known to most readers of this book, but what about Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies? On page 227, we are told that "Jones-Davies agrees explicitly with half and tacitly with all of Bentley's idea...." The footnote on the following page provides an incomplete citation for Jones-Davies and none at all for Bentley. The M.T. Jones-Davies index entry refers only to page 227! The only page number under Gerald Eades Bentley's index entry is 206, and that page yields the hidden fruit: complete citations (except for the authors' first names) of both Bentley's and Jones-Davies's books. Of course, the hundreds of sources cited in copious

footnotes that sometimes occupy more of the page than does the text would have constituted a bibliography of inordinate length, but such a bibliography would have saved the reader much confusion and puzzled flipping of pages.

The book is most daunting when inadequate citation is combined with Clubb's frequently obfuscating style. For example: "I propose to illustrate this phase of expansion and diversification by following the fortunes of one particular theatregram, one of the humbler ones, through the century: or, more precisely, by pursuing a complex of specific elements, for to speak of one alone is to reduce it to the abstraction of stock character or situation. (Of the latter a superrational analyst once claimed that there were only thirty-six.) My aim is the opposite, to show the unlimited fertility and transformational capability implicit in each configuration" (7-8). The parenthetical reference, undoubtedly to George Polti's *The 36 Dramatic Situations*, is nowhere specified. Furthermore, Clubb employs Italian terms like *balia*, *fante*, and *intreccio* without any helpful defining phrase. Those words can at least be found in an Italian-English dictionary, but the term "theatergram" does not appear in the standard dictionaries of theatrical terms.<sup>1</sup> In the prologue chapter, titled "Theatergrams," the first appearance of the word is embedded in as much of a definition as we ever get: "the same theatrical movement that promulgated the imitation of classical models produced romantic comedy and mixed genres, in Italy as well as England, and did so through a common process based on the principle of contamination of sources, genres, and accumulated stage-structures, or theatergrams" (5). Subsequent references to theatergrams of person, theatergrams of association, theatergrams of motion, theatergrams of design, and theatergrams of action offer little clarification beyond what is contextually implicit.

If it seems unfair to begin by pointing out minor flaws in this generally brilliant study, it is a kind of retaliation for what Clubb does to the reader. The book's Prologue is a formidable hurdle to be cleared before getting on to the good stuff. The concepts are difficult only because they are couched in convoluted or abstract language. Sentences like the following try the reader's patience: "Pursuit of signifying form in the Italian theater eventually attached the power of abstract representation to the design of comedy" (12). Often the same ideas reiterated in subsequent chapters are more lucidly expressed and thus appear more forceful.

Clubb begins with the premise that Shakespeare's comedies were influenced not by Plautus and Terence, but by Italian comedies of the 1500s, which were themselves experiments in genre through their borrowings and recombinings of various elements from the fixed genres of the classics. The bulk of the Prologue surveys the Italian Renaissance practice of play construc-

tion by contamination as applied to the Cinquecento's basic genres: *commedia grave*, pastoral play, and tragedy. The principles of contamination and complication led to "experiments in crossbreeding of genres" (6) and resulted, by the late Cinquecento, in a proliferation of dramatic forms which served humanists as a means of controlling perceptions of reality. The *commedia grave* that succeeded *commedia erudita* continued to flaunt its origins in neoclassical theory while gradually borrowing aspects of tragedy. Clubb sees the pastoral play as the result of a conscious progression—a "long humanistic competition with antiquity" (7)—toward the creation of a third genre using "comic theatergrams" in tragic form. The argument sounds plausible, except for the nagging question: why does Clubb avoid any mention of the satyr play? Even if she cannot consider it as an ancestor of the pastoral, she begs the question when she refers to the "third genre" as something "the ancients had not achieved" (13). Clubb concludes the Prologue with examples of Shakespeare's variations on the Italian experiments with genre. *Romeo and Juliet* may be a tragedy, but it employs the plot complications and the *balia* character (the Nurse) of comedy. *Othello* is caught up in a farce intrigue, which he switches over to tragedy. These and other instances attest to Shakespeare's debt to Italian experiments in theatrical form and his originality in the use of *contaminatio*.

The three chapters devoted to comedy begin with a survey of sixteenth-century efforts to perfect a genre that encompassed so many variations, ranging from the improvisations of *commedia dell'arte* to the highly formulaic *commedia erudita*. Despite their apparent differences, the professional actors and literary theorists alike upheld certain principles in their establishment of a norm. *Contaminatio*, "the fusion of increasingly numerous and disparate sources" (33), challenged the dramatist's skill at constructing a plot. The emphasis on dramatic structure made a corollary virtue of complications or multiple intrigues; by this standard, the insufficiently complicated *Mandragola* by Machiavelli was judged flawed. A third comic principle was the realistic imitation of middle-class urban life; that is, reality as contemplated from a detached perspective. Clubb analyzes the operation of these principles in Bibbiena's *La Calandria* (1513) and in Della Porta's *Gli duoi fratelli rivali* (ca. 1590), and goes on to show how the complicated action of Cinquecento comedies conveyed the idea that the messiness of reality as humans see it finds providential resolution in a grand design, thus metaphorically seconding the Catholic church's Counter Reformation agenda.

Chapter 2, "Commedia Grave and *The Comedy of Errors*," raises again the issue of Italian influence on Elizabethan drama. Tracing the evolution of *commedia grave* (spurred by the need to defend regular comedy against the

disorderliness of *commedia dell'arte*, as well as by the moral imperative of using comic structure to reinforce the idea of divine providence), Clubb shows how *The Comedy of Errors* fits the pattern. Adamant in her conviction that Shakespeare must have been closely acquainted with contemporary developments in Italian comedy, Clubb is unfortunately hampered by orthodox misconceptions such as accepting 1589 as “the earliest likely date for *The Comedy of Errors*” (53). Her insights about the Italian features inherent in Shakespeare’s work are so refreshingly honest, so unequivocally based upon the available evidence rather than the wishful conjecture that characterizes Stratfordian thinking, that her forced conclusion is almost heartbreaking: “It cannot be proved that Shakespeare read Italian plays, or saw *commedia dell'arte* troupes or Italian amateurs perform *commedia grave* at Elizabeth’s court, or heard about them from a friend” (63). Such things can, of course, be proved if only one replaces the pen-name with the real one, Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* are the apposite texts in Chapter 3, “Woman as Wonder: Theatergram of Italian and Shakespearean Comedy.” Both plays correspond to the Italian genre of tragicomedy (which is analyzed as a derivative of *commedia grave*, later taking the form of *tragicommedia pastorale*), and both—like their Counter Reformation-nurtured Italian counterparts—feature a young woman of admirable virtue who acts unconsciously in harmony with providence, bringing the intrigue to a redemptive resolution. Clubb sets up Helena and Isabella in opposition to Shakespearean heroines who correspond to more traditional *innamorata* types, among whom she includes a hitherto unknown figure, “Julia of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*” (67)! Borghini’s *Donna costante* (1578) and Bargagli’s *Pellegrina* (1568) further illustrate the genre’s conventions: the bed trick and the apparent death. Shakespeare’s plays, Clubb observes, both employed and transcended those devices for putting forth church doctrine on free will and its capacity to do good.

The three chapters on the pastoral constitute the heart of Clubb’s thesis and her best writing. In Chapter 4, “The Making of the Pastoral Play: Italian Experiments between 1573 and 1590,” Clubb gets a handle on her subject by classing twenty Italian pastoral plays according to the kinds of conventions they employ. Although she doesn’t clearly achieve her corollary aim of incidentally throwing “into relief some elements that are significant for the English theater” (99), the effort enables her to make several interesting points about the juxtaposition of social classes in the Italian works. The chapter does offer an interesting perspective on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, especially in terms of its remarkable resemblance to Pasqualigo’s *Gl’intricati* (published 1581). Adopting the comic intrigue structure with its intertwined love stories, the

pastoral became an excellent vehicle for “the ubiquitous late sixteenth-century theme of the discrepancy between appearance and reality” (109). The pastoral stage setting typically consists of two simultaneous locations, *selva* (woods) and *prato* (meadow), which serve respectively as scenic metaphors for the labyrinthine erring of love and the revelatory possibilities of sleeping and dreaming that grassy banks seem to invite. Clubb points out some intriguing differences between the *commedia grave* and the pastoral. Whereas the magicians and their ilk who appear in regular comedy “invariably turn out to be charlatans” (116), the sorcerers of pastoral plays do have the power to effect Ovidian metamorphoses. Metamorphosis, occurring only in the pastoral, serves as a means of gaining insight. The changes of heart effected through metamorphosis, according to Clubb, allow greater latitude for character development in the pastoral than is possible within the restricted format of regular comedy.

Understanding of the pastoral from an Italian Renaissance perspective yields useful insights on *The Winter’s Tale*. Its pastoral setting in Act 4 is analogous to the green worlds of *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, while its symbolic devices bear interesting resemblances to Guarini’s *Il pastor fido* (1589). The philosophical underpinnings of the symbolic pastoral are analyzed in Chapter 5, “Pastoral Nature and the Happy Ending.” Clubb explains the Renaissance association of the pastoral genre with a long-raging philosophical controversy over Nature versus Art. How these concepts are reflected, confusingly in Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573) and provocatively in *Il pastor fido*, forms the substance of the chapter. Her observations on the pastoral genre’s symbolic use of animals—sheep and goats, dogs, deer, lion, wolf, and boar—culminate in a fascinating discussion of the “tragicomic” bear in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Chapter 6, “The Third Genre: Pastoral Hybrids,” recapitulates in clearer language much of what has already been presented about the Renaissance search for mixed genres. One provocative nugget that pops out of this material unfortunately gets no elaboration; that is the idea of the stage setting as motive for dramaturgical innovation, surely a rare circumstance in theatre history. In Clubb’s words: “The playwrights’ aim in this systematic transgression was to test the nascent rules and the possibility of inventing a regular genre corresponding to the third of the stage sets extrapolated from Vitruvius by Serlio as ‘Scena Comica . . . Scena Tragica . . . Scena Satirica’” (154). Again, there is no mention of the satyr play as a possible progenitor of the Scena Satirica. Clubb goes on to show how the Italian pastoral expanded its scope beyond comedy’s aim of representing objective reality, to the representation of invisible reality. One of those realities beyond physical access was “the interior world of emotion, particularly that of love and its related feelings” (161); the other was “a reality of pure idea or abstract pattern, to be seen only by the eyes of the

mind" (162). Clubb finds in the green worlds of seven Shakespeare plays "contemplative space" similar to the pastoral's Arcadia "where self-knowledge is acquired or a celestial design glimpsed" (164). The chapter also reinforces Clubb's commonsense recognition of Elizabethan awareness of new developments in Italian theatre. As she rightly observes, "the evidence is especially important for doing justice to Shakespeare, whose work, albeit quintessentially English and with roots in medieval soil, demands recognition as avant-garde drama in which the latest theatrical fashions were appropriated in dazzlingly new combinations" (157). Those who acknowledge the full extent of the work of a certain "Italianated gentleman" at the court of Elizabeth I would certainly agree. Indeed, Clubb argues convincingly that Shakespeare's so-called "romances" should be more accurately labelled "pastorals."

For readers primarily interested in the Shakespearean connection, the book slowly runs out of steam in the three chapters on tragedy. Chapter 7, "The Arts of Genre: *Torrismondo* and *Hamlet*," stresses the Nordic historical content of both plays to show that both progress in parallel fashion "from history to myth to genre to criticism" (196). Clubb offers a fascinating and eloquent assessment of *Hamlet* as an experiment in genre, which strengthens the tragic genre by its very incorporation of nontragic elements from the various Italian genres. Here she gives scholarly resonance to Polonius's funny lines (II.2.387-92) on the "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral," which also serve as the book's epigraph. Chapter 8, "*The Virgin Martyr* and the Tragedia Sacra," analyzes the Dekker/Massinger play in terms of the conventions of the Italian religious drama that evolved from *rappresentazione sacra* to *tragedia sacra*. Chapter 9, "Fate Is for Gentiles: The Disclaimer in Baroque Tragedy," focuses on Dottori's *Aristodemo* (1657) as a baroque masterpiece that manages to reconcile Counter Reformation doctrine with the pagan tragic pattern of the working of fate.

*Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* concludes with a charming and enlightening tribute to the linkage between "erudition and entertainment" (249). This chapter or epilogue, "The Law of Writ and the Liberty: Italian Professional Theater," dispels our received notion that the commedia dell'arte and the literary genres of Cinquecento theatre were irreconcilably opposed in their methods, aims, and audiences. Clubb documents the professional players' serious interest in dramatic form and gives Isabella Andreini her well-deserved due in the process.

Clubb's compelling book should go far toward remedying theatre scholars' relative neglect of Italian Renaissance drama, while also giving needed stimulus to further investigation of the relationship between Shakespeare and Italy.

<sup>1</sup> Terry Hodgson, *The Drama Dictionary* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1988); William Packard, David Pickering, and Charlotte Savidge, *The Facts on File Dictionary of the Theatre* (New York: Facts on File, 1988); Joel Trapido, ed., *An International Dictionary of Theatre Language* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1985).

## The Elimination of Humanity

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### Deciphering Elizabethan Fiction

by Reid Barbour. University of Delaware Press, 1993

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*Revised by Warren Hope. Dr. Hope is author of The Shakespeare Controversy (1992).*

Academic students of literature have for decades labored under the delusion that books are produced by books. The result is that their studies read clinically, like the writings of sexologists, haunted by technique. Not only is this result off-putting—trying to maintain interest in what they write is like trying not to stare at the little piles of dandruff on a professor's shoulders—it is also fraudulent. Men and women produce books; pretending otherwise keeps us from even approaching the vicinity of truth.

Why should anyone pretend otherwise?

The answer to that one would require a history of the study of English literature in schools of higher education throughout the past century. This is not the place for that history. Briefly, three fashions threatened the once charming study of literature: first, the Teutonic analysis of ancient languages and literatures came into vogue; second, technology became king of the academic hill; and finally, such “disciplines” as management and marketing squirmed their way to the center of the post-secondary educational trough.

These three fads left literature in a lurch of sorts—trying to defend its once honorable terrain by taking on the superficial characteristics of these perceived threats to its legitimacy and status. Dons and professors, once content to murmur blissfully over their sherry, began to make ominous sounds—sounds reminiscent of philologists, nuclear physicists, and alchemists of greed. Even T.S. Eliot, Lord love us, was driven to comparing poets to catalysts. Catalysts, after all, are so much more objective, measurable, and knowable than, say, Francois Villon or Siegfried Sassoon—men who scratched and bled and did their best to speak the truth they found while passing through this world in verse. Writing about these individuals is all right for amateurs, mere poetry