



Jonathan Bate & Dora Thornton, Shakespeare: Staging the World, with Becky Allen, Shakespeare's Britain, London: The British Museum Press, 2012, Paperback. 304 p. ISBN 978-0714128245. £25.00

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Shakespeare's Britain (96 p.) and *Shakespeare: Staging the World* (272 p.), both by the renowned Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate, and Dora Thornton, a curator at the British Museum and a specialist of Renaissance Europe, were published last year to accompany the 2012 exhibition "Shakespeare: Staging the World" that took place at the British Museum. The basic principle of the exhibition was to present a view of the world from the perspective of a Shakespearean audience, showing objects and works of art associated with extracts from Shakespeare's plays and poems. The catalogue, both in its shorter paperback version (*Shakespeare's Britain*) and longer version (*Shakespeare: Staging the World*) reflects the association of the Shakespearean text and visual culture that was the basis of the exhibition.

This type of approach could be related to the recent developments in the area of Shakespearean studies and visual culture. It is, however, closer to the field of material culture, a term that has many different facets, from book culture to the materiality of the plays' production, from the use of props or the mention of objects in the text, to the notion of curiosity and the *studiolo*. However, even if the two catalogues can be appreciated and used by a scholarly readership, they are first and foremost designed for a wider audience, like the exhibition they were based on.

The shorter version is divided into five chapters inserted between a short introduction and conclusion. They are geographically and historically oriented, from "World City" (seemingly about London but in fact about the materiality of the plays' performance) to "Strangers and Outsiders" (that focuses mainly on the representation of Venice, *Othello*, and the Other in *The Tempest*) thus creating a dynamic from the local to the global. The other chapters are about "Romance and Reality" (supposedly about Shakespeare's rural England but they also concentrate on the question of religion), "The English Past" (on the importance of the past in Shakespeare's plays, including the classical past and the way its use constituted a commentary on Elizabethan England) and "The British Future" (mainly about the accession of James I and the national question of England and Britain).

The longer catalogue, after the forewords and the authors' preface, consists in 10 chapters, from "London, circa 1612: 'World City'" to "Legacy", which is in fact a conclusion devoted to the creation of the Shakespearean myth. It also includes the list of the exhibits, and a very useful index. The first chapter details the material and visual culture in the context of early modern London, while the others more or less follow the chronology of Shakespeare's life, even though they are also thematic, such as "The Noble Moor", mainly about the representation of blackness, while chapter 7 (" 'For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft': the Scottish Play"), uses *Macbeth* as a

starting point to develop the themes of witchcraft and political rebellion such as the Gunpowder Plot.

In both versions, the different chapters allow the authors to introduce various objects or art works that can be related in one way or another to the Shakespearean text although the associations can sometimes be rather artificial, such as the quotation from *King Lear*, “Out, vile jelly!”, to illustrate the reliquary of a Jesuit priest executed in 1606 (*Staging the World*, p. 192), or the parallel drawn between Antony and Cleopatra, and Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex (*Shakespeare’s Britain*, p. 44). Others are more straightforward and so more justified, such as the ink and watercolour drawing of “Four Studies of a Marmoset” (unknown artist, British Museum, c. 1520-50) illustrating the reference to the snaring of the “nimble marmoset” that Caliban wants to teach Stephano (*Staging the World*, p. 83). On the other hand, the “scold” (*Shakespeare’s Britain*, p. 26) that appears on a carved wood decoration from Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-Upon-Avon could have been related to the “irksome brawling scold” of the *Taming of the Shrew*.

That said, the two books are catalogues of an exhibition that was meant for the general public. The aim is to show beautiful and / or interesting objects or works of art that can be associated with Shakespeare’s works and the context of early modern England. Most of the exhibits come from the British Museum, the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum or other British institutions, and occasionally from abroad. Those documents are absolutely beautiful and the quality of the photographs is outstanding. These are two fine volumes that are a pleasure to consult and flip through in any possible way, like one looks at a cabinet of curiosities. They were not first intended for scholars, and this shows in some of the documents that are well-known or more predictable, such as Isaac Oliver’s famous miniature of Edward Herbert portrayed in a melancholy pose (*Staging the World*, p. 80). Most of them are truly original such as (on the same subject) a lesser-known “Jug with a portrait of a melancholy lover”, from the Victoria and Albert Museum (*Staging the World*, p. 81). In the shorter version, the comments are somewhat sparse, for obvious reasons, but the description of the objects or art works is precise and useful. In the longer version, the texts of the chapters are elaborate and scholarly even though they are destined to a general public. In both versions, the photographs often focus on details that one would not necessarily have seen in the exhibition, such as a wonderfully preserved hand-sewn woman’s jacket (*Staging the World*, p. 75), the silver seal-die of Sir Walter Raleigh as governor of Virginia (*Staging the World*, p. 79), or a beautiful pedlar’s chest found at Samlesbury Hall, near Preston, Lancashire, now kept at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, that also contained a bracelet rosary (*Staging the World*, p. 195). Many documents (especially the works of art) can be found on the Internet, but in the case of the pedlar’s chest, for example, it is not the case, as far as I know. The longer version also reproduces several documents related to Shakespeare’s life, such as his deposition in the Belott v. Mountjoy case (*Staging the World*, p. 12), a text that is well known to Shakespearean scholars, but that is rarely shown in facsimile. The two catalogues could thus prove useful to find original class material for a course on early modern English literature or culture, especially visual culture, and to illustrate certain topics such as melancholy with the documents cited above, or, to give another example, witchcraft and witch-hunting with the photographs of witches’ bridles and iron collars (*Staging the World*, p. 200) used for gagging women who were accused of being witches.

“Shakespearean matter”, as opposed to Shakespeare the author, is a wonderfully versatile subject. The creation of the Shakespearean myth in the eighteenth century has allowed numerous all-encompassing visions of the poet: he invented “the human” according to Harold Bloom, and in this particular case, he “staged the world”. Jonathan Bate and Dora Thornton are well aware of this when, in their conclusion, they acknowledge that Shakespeare became a “national divinity” in the eighteenth century (*Shakespeare’s Britain*, p. 89). Shakespeare contained all and “staged the world”; presumably the world was his stage. In spite of the “bardolatric” possibilities offered by the title of the exhibition and the longer catalogue, the two books succeed in avoiding that premise. Given the infinite variety and the quality of the pictures, and with the quotations as a context for each document, they provide a wonderful insight into the material culture of Shakespeare’s time and a perfectly enjoyable read for all, specialists or not.