

Shakespeare's Literary Architecture in *King Lear*

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Mudriczki, Judit. *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear: An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage*. Budapest–Párizs: L'Harmattan, 2020. 126 pages. ISBN 978-2-343-20808-4. Pbk. 1990 HUF.

Judit Mudriczki's monograph explores William Shakespeare's mastery of composition in creating *King Lear* by delineating Shakespeare's "literary architecture" (Saphiro 62), that is, the way the playwright took old stories, romances, plays, and turned them into something new and acutely relevant to his times. In her book, Mudriczki joins the lively discussion of Hungarian scholars on *King Lear* (for further scholarly references one can consult the website of the Hungarian Shakespeare Association). *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear* is a thoroughly researched work, incorporating the results of long years' investigations. The impressive number of references embedded in clearly structured arguments reflect the weight and earnestness of this research effort. The title highlights a philological approach, and indeed, the author does not subscribe to a New Historicist treatment of the play, as some recent critics such as David K. Anderson, Anthony Parr, or John J. Norton do. However, one of her main criteria remains to present a "historically valid" (17) set of arguments. Nor does she aim at a formalist reading: the philological investigation unfolds against the backdrop of contemporary rhetorical and political discourse. Mudriczki's volume provides a valuable contribution to the study of *King Lear* (1606) in two major ways: first, it acknowledges and underlines the continuity between early Tudor drama and Elizabethan-Jacobean plays by claiming that Shakespeare's tragedy largely stems from the medieval morality tradition. Second, by juxtaposing contemporaneous rhetorical manuals and scenes from *King Lear*, the author

reinforces earlier assumptions about possible sources for Shakespeare's rhetorical knowledge with new insights into *King Lear*, which have previously escaped scholarly attention. The arguments follow a clear line of logic, proceeding from the macrotextual towards the microtextual level of the play in each chapter.

The first chapter, "The Dramaturgical and Theatrical Heritage: a Contrastive Reading of *Magnyfycence*, *King Leir* and *King Lear*," presents an insightful tripartite comparison with the goal of "establishing the interpretive frame for a historicized understanding of Shakespearean dramaturgy" (21). While Mudriczki builds on the original assumptions of Maynard Mack (1972) and Robert Potter (1975) in calling attention to the similarities between *King Lear* and Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1516), she departs from their claims in emphasizing the embeddedness of Shakespearean plays in early Tudor dramatic conventions, which Mack found almost arbitrary, saying that "the complexity of the play as a whole sets it worlds apart from this tradition (the morality plays)" (Mack 58). After establishing the common literary tradition for all three of the plays, that is, a "mirror for princes," which Mudriczki re-formulates into "mirror of governance" (9), she argues for a specific, English version of this convention, detailing the contrasting elements. The distribution of characters (the good, the bad, and the jesters) and the recurring theatrical elements, such as letters and disguises, are discussed in relation to all three plays. Mudriczki concludes that Shakespeare's *King Lear* contains a striking number of similarities with Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, both on the macrotextual and the dramaturgical levels.

The second chapter, "Rhetorical and Poetical Conventions: Shakespeare's Arte [*sic*] of Poesy in the Love Contest and the Mock Trial Scene," discusses the impact of contemporaneous formal rhetoric on playwriting, namely that of George Puttenham's rhetorical guide, *The Arte of English Poesie*, "published anonymously by Richard Field in 1589" (51), written in the vernacular. This chapter places Puttenham next to Shakespeare in a shared endeavor to create

art in the vernacular English, not only in Latin. This is a novel insight because rhetoric as a line of inquiry has been somewhat neglected by scholars of early modern drama; it has gained fresh momentum with publications like Heinrich F. Pletts's *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* (2004), and the Blackwell *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (2004). In this chapter the author furthers and refines the claims of William Rushton's 1909 book, *Shakespeare and "The Arte of English Poesie,"* and Catharine Lisak's 2002 article, "An Essay in Comparison: Shakespeare's Technical Inventiveness in the Light of George Puttenham's *Arte*," as neither of them mentions *King Lear* in their respective analyses. Excerpts from the third book of Puttenham's work, discussing figures of speech and proper public behavior, are juxtaposed with two specific scenes from *King Lear*: the love contest and the mock-trial scene. Furthermore, in accordance with the comparative philological approach of the monograph, these parallel scenes are scrutinized not only in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but also in the anonymous play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605). Despite the similarities, there are striking differences between the two plays. The rhetorical devices employed in the Shakespearean play are the only pieces of information from which the audience could infer the intents of the daughters in the love contest of the opening scene. Furthermore, these figures of speech and tropes play a vital role in setting the framework of a public, royal event, something that contemporary audiences could immediately understand, as opposed to *The True Chronicle*, where the love contest is played out in a family circle. Both the love contest and the mock trial scenes are selected for a good reason: both depict highly regulated and rhetorically constrained public scenes of court and mock law-court events. In the analysis of these scenes Mudriczki familiarizes the reader with the particulars of Puttenham's book, identifying some of the rhetorical figures of the play with the help of their description and definition in the rhetorical guide, such as asyndeton, meaning loose language, or equating the extensive use of hyperboles with flattering in the case of Regan and Goneril, or litotes (understatement) in Cordelia's case. The linguistic phenomena

and their significance are supported by images from emblem books, reflecting contemporary thinking about the heart-tongue dichotomy, just to mention one example. The illustrations revealing how customary it was to contrast the functions of the two organs illuminate the rhetorical argument of this chapter even more vividly. All this helps the author to draw fascinating conclusions about Cordelia's "nothing."

The analysis in the third chapter leads to new insights which are rooted in early modern theories of governance, a much-discussed topic with a sea of literature from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first. The author calls the method applied here the "anthropomorphic mapping of the characters," which is not to be mistaken for Bradleyan character-criticism: anthropomorphic mapping has nothing to do with psychology, but with the figurative depiction of governance. This method in itself is not new, but in Mudriczki's application it yields fresh results. As a point of departure, she discusses the "king's two bodies" theory, a medieval philosophical-political tradition for describing and criticizing governance. This conceptualization of royal power was transformed by James I's reign, as Mudriczki points out, into the organic conception of state, which can be successfully mapped onto the play. Another recent literary trend she emphatically diverges from is the corporeal turn or body studies. Although she briefly draws on the findings of David Hillman's and Carla Mazzio's monograph, *The Body in Parts* (Routledge, 1997), she clarifies early in the book that she does not intend to engage with the corporeal aspects of *King Lear*. Quite the opposite, she wishes to reach back to the classical tradition, the figurative reading of the human body. Hillman-Mazzio's monograph is only used for minor details on the perception of specific parts of the body in early modern times. In the organic conception of state, the King was the Head of State, a notion King James was fond of emphasizing in his public speeches. The economy of the metaphorical body parts' distribution is presented in a convincing way. For instance, Cordelia is the heart in this body politic, as customarily stated, and Kent represents the eyes, in sharp contrast with the blinded

Gloucester, who tragically fails in the judgment of his sons. The other examples for the organic conception of state in the play are similarly illuminating, and are supported by the playtext of the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto, culminating in a persuasive and clear conclusion: by abandoning his throne, which could be equated with the state losing its head, and by banishing his heart, Cordelia, King Lear completely upends the balance of the kingdom (the body) and thereby engenders chaos and “nothingness.” Considering how widely known the rhetoric of state as a body was in Shakespeare’s time, this understanding of the play must have been more than obvious for contemporaneous audiences.

All in all, the book does justice to its promise of presenting a historically valid and philologically accurate argument, successfully merging old and new approaches to the play. Furthermore, it offers several critical insights that could inspire further research. The leitmotif of governance smoothly weaves together the three chapters discussing three different threads of the dramaturgical heritage, rhetorical conventions, and the influence of early modern theories of governance. Due to the abundance of early modern literary and cultural references and the complexities of the philological analysis, this monograph is especially recommended for scholars of early modern English culture and literature.

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