

400 years later Shakespeare, Comedy and Twelfth Night

BOOK DATA ?

By DAVID PIGOT

TWELFTH NIGHT AND SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY by Clifford Leech. University of Toronto Press, 1965. 88 pp., \$3.50. (This book consists of the three lectures given at the Neptune Theatre last summer by Prof. Clifford Leech to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare and Neptune as part of the programme arranged by Dalhousie and Neptune to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare.)

I have often felt that a man does himself a disservice by having his spoken word committed to closer scrutiny in print. For obvious reasons a lecture will exhibit a certain diffuseness, and make less intellectual demands than material intended for reading.

It is impossible to say how much, if any, Prof. Leech has reworked these lectures for publication, but the plain truth seems to be, they make very suitable lectures, but are rather thin as contributions to Shakespearean scholarship. Somehow we expect more from the printed word; we expect new ground to be broken, or at least, a fresh approach to old topics. It is not easy to know, therefore, exactly what standards of judgement should be applied to this publication.

As his title implies, Twelfth Night gets the most attention in these lectures presumably because that play current at the Neptune Theatre at the time of Prof. Leech's visit to Halifax. His view of the play seems to be that it does not contain a great deal of laughter; instead, it offers "delight" which, according to Sir Philip Sidney, is preferable: "Delight hath a joyful in it; laughter hath only a scornful tickling."

We rejoice or delight in the gracefulness of the spectacle. "And yet", warns Leech, "the idea of a necessary doubt." Then follows this assertion: "The more expertly the dramatist writes, the more difficult it is to prevent our mental reservations from getting in the way of a full response to the comedy." I quote this passage for two reasons: it points, in Prof. Leech's view, to an important aspect of the play -- the dramatist's own dubiety; but also, it represents for me a type of statement fairly typical in these lectures. It sits on the brink of significance; as part of the fleeting elements of a lecture, it hints at meaning, but it seems unfit to withstand re-readings.

Apart from the fact that the nature of the expertise, of the reservations, and of the expected, response, is misty and fluctuating, there is the hint here -- as elsewhere in the book -- that the mental reservations belong, not to Shakespeare's delighted audience, but to the 'dubious' of his academic critics. Perhaps there is a trace of irony here: does this publication tempt us to criticize Prof. Leech's performance using a standard by which the lectures were not created?

Nevertheless, there are many fine observations in these lectures. While they are hardly new and startling, they provide stimulating and sound interpretation. The view of Troilus and Cressida is especially interesting and refreshing in the face of repeated, laborious critical articles examining the work as a 'problem' play, or dismissing it as a disunited miscellany of genres. Prof. Leech sees the play as a clever statement on the nature of Time. "Time will destroy all things -- the love of two young people, the city of Troy, even the lives of Troy's conquerors." Troilus is in the unenviable position of cherishing unchanging ideals in a world in which change is fundamental. Prof. Leech has a valuable donation to make to the eternal debate over the character of Cressida: she expresses her love for the Troilus she will deceive; that it does not last, does not mean that the love is false. "We should have an easier world if we could equate love and fidelity."

Troilus and Cressida is discussed together with A Winter's Tale in the third lecture. This is an interesting and justifiable linking: they are both, in their own way, statements on Time and Love. Prof. Leech's opinion that these plays are forms of comedy "where the notion of 'delight' is no longer dominant" seems to be a point capable of debate, as is his claim that, in both of these plays, Shakespeare achieves "full mastery of his aim."

books in review

He emphasizes that the play "implies a need for the application of Art to the general conduct of life" -- a rather vague concept which he does spend time explaining, but he seems to miss the opportunity of drawing valuable parallels with Troilus and Cressida, and of making more pertinent observations concerning the play and its theme of Time. There is much to be said about the effect of Time on Leontes, on the nature of Polixenes, on the love of Leontes for Polixenes, the necessity of the much-criticized sixteen-year gap" in the play, and so on. There is a beautiful statement implicit in the play about the necessity of a youth coming to age, of discarding the pure boyhood loves for the love of woman. The impersonal laws of mutability attack the state of innocence, and replace that innocence with a capacity for evil as well as for the possibility of greater bliss. Milton knew this theme -- it is one of the great topics of literature, and receives superb expression in A Winter's Tale.

There are at least two signs of the academic times in these lectures which could with profit be avoided. One is the tendency to pigeon-hole for easier identification -- "the comedy of festivity", "plays of inclusion"; the other is an unwillingness to resist snide remarks about other critics. Prof. Leech shows little charity towards Leslie Hotson, who has brought considerable new life and interest -- as well as sound, scholastic comment -- to subjects and events long covered with pedantic dust. Even if Hotson's enthusiasm does sometimes lead him into untenable positions, Prof. Leech does neither himself nor Dr. Hotson justice by saying things like, "Dr. Hotson is altogether too ready. He is anxious not to miss a single joke, and we may feel that he misses almost everything else."

In all, these lectures make pleasant enough reading and raise some stimulating if not profound questions about Shakespearean comedy. I do not believe that Prof. Leech will claim that they constitute a valuable contribution to Shakespeare criticism; on the other hand, he criticizes; and on that count, he is a capable lecturer.

'Lament for a Nation' Grant's book stirs nation to debate

By Canadian University Press

George Grant's book Lament for a Nation has stirred debates across Canada.

Hamilton -- "Don't throw Canada into the melting pot and blend it with the so-called 'Great Society', pleaded the Tories at the McMaster Debating Union.

The resolution, "That economic integration with the United States is in Canada's interest," was defeated by an audience vote in the first of a series of debates replacing Model Parliament, last month.

The Liberal Government speakers both concentrated on abolishing tariffs as a means of revitalizing Canadian industry. Prime Minister Dave Woolford said North America as a whole would be a more viable economic unit than Canada alone.

"You are being taxed for patriotism. Our industries have too many different products, and too

few units of each product to be economic. Tariffs cost as much as the Canada Pension Plan and are only an incentive to inefficiency," he said.

Opposition Leader Chuck Donley said research, unions, and industry would be dominated by the States. "We have two separate societies, we need two separate governments."

The second Tory speaker said he feared the political influence of right-wing extremism and anti-socialism could make Canadians "parrots of American policy."

Debate in favor of continental union with the United States, Mr. Innis said pursuit of Canadian nationalism was "frivolous". Only the Grey Cup, CBC and the Canada Council wanted to save a Canadian identity.

Nationalist proponent Hector Massey said Canada's search for a personality throughout its history had produced a Canada which was neither English nor American, but took the best from each.

Canada's personality, he said, is cautious, slow, but experimental. "We don't have to be all gas and no brakes."

"America as a continental power could become over-adventurous." Canada should remain as a check and friendly critic on American action, Massey argued.

In rebuttal, Innis cited Canada's inaction on the Vietnam conflict to show that a country which sits back and doesn't contribute makes a poor critic.


Any state in the Union would be a better critic of American policy than Canada, said Innis. "We are a Canadian body with an American soul."

Massey countered that Canada's problem lay in "myopic anglosaxonism, a lack of response between French and English, and a lack of mobility for minority groups." He also said Canada lacks "an adventurous economic policy to develop the country. Too many people use government for their own ends not for a Canadian entity."


"We have too many old men running the country. What we need is more new blood... like that coming from Quebec," said Massey.

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