

John Berryman, *Berryman's Shakespeare: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings by John Berryman*. Edited by John Haffenden, with a Preface by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. lxxvii + 396 pp. ISBN (paperback) 0-374-52750-4.

Andy Frazee, University of Georgia

Best known as the prize-winning poet of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) and *The Dream Songs* (1969), John Berryman (1914-1972) balanced his literary production with a strong commitment to serious Shakespearean scholarship that lasted throughout his lifetime. Edited by Berryman biographer John Haffenden, *Berryman's Shakespeare* collects the poet's nearly forty years of finished and unfinished Shakespearean studies, including lectures, essays, project notes, and correspondence.

Haffenden's fifty-nine page introduction is substantial in itself, not only as an introduction to Berryman's work on Shakespeare, but as an overview of the areas of twentieth-century Shakespearean scholarship in which Berryman was involved. Haffenden introduces us to the main areas of Berryman's Shakespearean work: his "popular biographical study" of Shakespeare; his substantial work on *King Lear*; his "excursion into the realm of scholarly speculation," including his enquiry into the identity of the *Sonnets*' "Mr. W. H.," and his other essays on individual plays (Berryman 2001, xiv).

In order to provide a substantial amount of contextual information in a limited space, the introduction is both more intense and more scholarly in language than most of Berryman's own work that follows. Though the introduction is, of course, necessary, *Berryman's Shakespeare* does not get fully underway until Berryman's work itself. The first sentence of the first essay in the collection, "Shakespeare's Early Comedy," epitomizes Berryman's angle on, and expression of, Shakespeare's life and work: "The dramatist's grandfather was probably a Richard Shakespeare, who farmed in a small way at Snitterfield in Warwickshire, renting from the wealthy Robert Arden of Wilmcote, the other grandfather" (3). Berryman's approach to Shakespeare is largely biographical; even in essays focusing on textual scholarship, the poet always hopes "to reach Shakespeare" (236). The man behind the texts, Berryman believed, was the key to the texts themselves. And searching for Shakespeare the man is, for Berryman, itself an act of imagination,

poetry even — to the point of reading every book Shakespeare is known to have read, in hopes of an insight into the mind of the Bard. In order to fully understand Shakespeare, Berryman implies, one must, as in method acting, become him — or at least be able to reconstruct and approximate his influences.

The highlight of the book, not surprisingly, is Berryman's writing itself. Throughout *Berryman's Shakespeare*, the poet supplements his scholarship with an often lyrical presentation, sometimes including spontaneous outbursts of poetic, critical insight:

Sometimes, without warning, in a short speech, the soul of a man seems indeed to surface, for an instant, before it returns forever to the depths. Sometimes a series of the poet's phrases will drag at our profoundest thought as if, truly, we overheard the soul of the world murmuring truths to herself. (51)

The most vivid of these writings on Shakespeare reflect Berryman's interest in and work towards a popular, comprehensive biography of Shakespeare. These include a series of lectures, beginning with the biographical centerpiece, "Shakespeare at Thirty":

Suppose with me a time, a place, a man who was waked, risen, washed, dressed, fed, congratulated, on a day in latter April long ago — about April 22, say, of 1594, a Monday — whether at London in lodgings or at a friend's or a tavern, a small house in the market town Stratford some hundred miles by miry ways northwest, or at Titchfield House a little closer southwest, or elsewhere, but somewhere in England at the height of the Northern Renaissance; a different world. (31)

It is Berryman's ability to transport us into Shakespeare's time and mindset that makes these lectures and essays often delightful to read.

Berryman's most serious scholarly work was focused on *King Lear*; he hoped to work towards an "adequate critical edition of the play" (173): "My principal aim, on the textual side, is simply to establish a text of the play — to recover, as far as science and imagination can, its verbal substance in the form which will depart least from what the author would recognize as his own work" (175). Towards these goals, Berryman waded into the controversy over the authenticity of the two main *Lear* texts, the 1608 Quarto and the 1623 Folio — neither of which, according to Berryman's understanding of the current state of the discipline, was considered to be the text as originally composed or performed. These texts "report, with upward of 1,200 serious variations, an event — Shakespeare's manuscript — which both of them have witnessed (at whatever remove) and we have not" (179). Berryman's attempts to "weigh [the texts'] testimony" considers many

variations between them and struggles with the question of which text can be considered more authoritative, as well as with the texts' modes of transcription. Was either of the texts "a communal memorial reconstruction by the actors [The King's Men], finding themselves without a prompt book while on a provincial tour" (195)? Was either taken down through stenography by an audience member at a production of the play? Could either have been prompt books for the actors? The essays, notes, and letters (to Lear scholar W. W. Greg, Berryman mentor Mark Van Doren, and others) here comprise the most specialized aspects of *Berryman's Shakespeare* — with interest, perhaps, mainly for *Lear* scholars.

The remainder of *Berryman's Shakespeare* consists of another scholarly exploration as well as individual critical essays. The second scholarly project proves at least as speculative, if not as rigorous, as Berryman's work on *Lear*: the identities of Shakespeare's presumed collaborator on *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as of "Mr. W. H.," the dedicatee of the *Sonnets* — and, most interestingly, whether they might be the same person — William Houghton (or, perhaps, William Haughton). The critical essays review the *Sonnets*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *King John*, *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Macbeth*, and *2 Henry IV*. The book here shifts back to more of a critical treatment of the texts, while always, again, trying to find the man beneath the texts as a mode of elucidation. On the *Sonnets*, Berryman writes:

These are the sonnets of a young man, probably; their chief defect a certain indifference to how things wind up . . . their chief virtues expressiveness and violent power . . . [T]hey strike one as proceeding from a man more or less without a pose — roughly, naked; not to speak of the humiliating privacy of some of their subject matter. (285-86)

Berryman's discussion of *Macbeth* in this section of the book is particularly insightful.

The main question surrounding *Berryman's Shakespeare* is within which context we are to see it: Berryman's, or Shakespeare's? Do Berryman's decades-old insights into *Lear* or Shakespeare's biography make the book a necessity for Shakespeare scholars? Or ought we to approach Berryman's critical/scholarly work on Shakespeare primarily in relation to his own life and literary output? Perhaps Berryman's work awaits a critic to examine the relationship with and appropriation of Shakespeare into Berryman's poetry. The book gives us a possibly strong link between a poet and his work, a link that, I would argue, is mostly missing with Shakespeare. We can see Berryman's obsession with identity, for example, both in his Shakespearean work and in his fragmented antihero Henry in *The Dream Songs*, and this is but the easiest of the connections that could be drawn. Until then, *Berryman's Shakespeare* remains a work hard to categorize. It *seems*

important — the critical work of a great twentieth century poet and heretofore unsung Shakespeare scholar — but important to whom?

References

- Berryman, John. 2001. *Berryman's Shakespeare: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings by John Berryman*. Edited by John Haffenden. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Berryman, John. 1956. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy.
- Berryman, John. 1969. *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.