

Prince, Kathryn. *Shakespeare in the Victorian Periodicals*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008. vii-180 pp. ISBN 10: 0-415-96243-9 (Cloth).

E-Books. Kindles. iPads, and Nooks. The recent proliferation of innovative information delivery systems seems to be solely a contemporary issue. But lest we forget, a similar explosion of information formats, specifically inexpensive journals for an emerging readership, also occurred in nineteenth-century England. While the Victorian reception history of Shakespeare has been examined by multiple critics, the role of the periodical press in shaping Shakespeare in the period has largely been ignored. Kathryn Prince's recent book helps to remedy that neglect, and she correctly asserts that many who have written on nineteenth-century Shakespeare tend to use periodicals only as ancillary works that help to support larger arguments about the role of the Bard in shaping Victorian texts and contexts. Moreover, Prince's work comes at a time when we are reconsidering more marginalized voices, and her book proves to be extremely useful as a supplement, if not an alternative, to the grand narratives many critics have proposed.

After surveying recent critical trends in her "Introduction," Prince posits that many earlier studies offer a narrative-driven, albeit fragmentary structure, "illuminating the period by flashes of lightning" in a way that is similar to Coleridge's description of Edmund Kean's acting; most of those accounts, Prince continues, also move toward a Darwinian "inevitable conclusion in the present" of Shakespeare's exalted status (1). She counters, in response, that British periodicals of the nineteenth century "reveal the richness and diversity of Victorian Shakespeare reception in a way that encourages comparative, rather than narrative, analysis" (2). Instead of relying on articles as "corroborative or corrective examples," she suggests that a wider survey of periodicals will reveal a variety of Shakespeares, fiercely contested and hardly monolithic. Of course, other narratives have also proposed that Shakespeare can be employed for contradictory claims, but Prince's focus on reception "from the ground up" may be unique in these explorations. Her first three chapters are neatly divided into sections on periodicals aimed at working-men, children, and women; the last two chapters consider important theatrical concerns: the so-called "theater crisis" at mid-century, and, in the last chapter, the debate over a national theater.

The newly-literate working class is the focus of Prince's first chapter, "Making Shakespeare Readers in the Early Working Class Press." Carefully comparing radical and conservative

periodicals, Prince highlights the distinction between journals such as the *Penny Magazine*, edited by the prolific Charles Knight, and others, such as the radical *The National, a Library for the People*. The former tended to focus on, in Prince's words, "enculturation" by educating workers on a "variety of culturally-significant topics," including Shakespeare, while simultaneously "diverting them from less wholesome pastimes" (22, 23); the latter employed Shakespeare as "compatriot, a man who had," like its idealized readership, "risen from obscure beginnings" but who "never abandoned his solidarity with the people of his own class" (29). Prince concludes that by "finding innovative uses for Shakespeare's life and works, these periodicals expanded Shakespeare's status as the national poet to include political values that challenged class hierarchy" (36).

Unlike the working-class magazines, the journals for children examined in Chapter 2, "Shakespeare for Manly Boys and Marriageable Girls," had to aim for "a broader audience that included parents and educators, the gatekeepers to children's reading experiences" (37). Prince proposes that many of these periodicals, such as the *Girl's Own Paper*, borrowed their style and tone from the ubiquitous *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) by Charles and Mary Lamb, a book "presumably handed down from one generation to the next along with outgrown toys and clothing" (39). Interestingly, but predictably, the gender of the children's audience bifurcated the Shakespearean angle. In other words, while the magazines for boys focused on biography, the ones for girls had a "moralising tendency" (40), in hopes of cultivating a whole crop of Angels in the House. In addition, although Victorian boys "were taught to admire Shakespeare as an embodiment of English manliness," girls were "encouraged to emulate Shakespeare's heroines," particularly after the enormous success of books by Anna Jameson in 1832 and Mary Cowden Clark at mid-century (54). In sum, "children's publishers borrowed the sensationalism and fun that gave Shakespeare an added appeal to young readers," while the sterile Shakespeare of the Lambs and others "contributed a moral focus" (60).

In Chapter 3, "Character Criticism and its Discontents in Periodicals for Women," Prince sets out to challenge the notion that the only type of Shakespearean criticism written by women in this period focused on characters because women would be particularly adept at this activity "by virtue of their more emotional and sensitive natures" (63). While Prince admits that a number of women mined this mode of discussion, even those who did vary in their approaches. For instance, whereas Helen Faucit employed an "intimate [and] highly personal" tone, Fanny Kemble "adopted a more overtly scholarly approach" (64). But despite these differences, it is important to remember that *both* women published early versions of their later book-length works in periodicals — Faucit in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and Kemble in *Macmillan's Magazine*. Later in the chapter, Prince also shows the wide range of women's magazines, from *Victoria*, which had a "varied but

always considered approach to Shakespeare," to *Ladies Treasury*, which, "more often than not, attempted to make Shakespeare as familiar, and as fashionable, as the latest dress pattern" (70, 79).

In Chapters 4 and 5, Prince widens her focus to consider the Theatres Regulation Act and the Great Exhibition, and, in the last chapter, the push for a national theater in England. Both of these events, as she points out, "were driven by many of the same objectives" vis-à-vis Shakespeare as the periodicals, including "accessability, education, and enculturation" (124). Many periodicals, such as *The Era* and the *Theatrical Journal*, lobbied for such legislation, starting a push that would actually take close to one 100 years, from 1848 to Parliament's vote to finance a national theater in 1849. Like many that Prince traces in the earlier chapters, this debate focuses on notions of "social improvement" for the working classes as well as Shakespeare's role in underpinning Victorian ideology both at home, and later, in the empire at large. Using such models as the Comédie Française, a sometimes strained alliance, including, but not limited to Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, and Harley Granville-Barker pronounced in the periodicals that a national theater would be "considered an intervention" to protect English citizens "from the intellectual poverty of an unregulated stage" (136). Of course, it was not until 1963 that the vision would be realized, but as Prince concludes, this century-long struggle to allow "labourers as well as lords" to attend Shakespeare performances could not have been possible without Victorian periodicals to lay the groundwork for this important debate (149). In sum, Prince's book provides a valuable addition to the work on Shakespeare in the Victorian era. By focusing on the ways in which emerging technologies provide information to emerging audiences, her work is as interesting as it is *au courant*.

## References

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