

*Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction: Theorizing Foundling and Lyric Plots*, by Barbara L. Estrin. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012. xxvii + 255pp. ISBN 978-1-61149-369-6. \$80.00 (cloth).

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This study asserts at its beginning that "The art of the simple is at the core of this study of the intersection between the foundling and Petrarchan plots in contemporary fiction and Shakespeare's plays" (p. xvii), but what follows is rather more dense critical fare than this statement suggests. The study is very much presented in two halves, which can at times seem like two discrete studies yoked together with a degree of unsatisfactory violence. Estrin, I suspect, would claim that this is part of the point and the purpose of her approach. She deliberately "reads backwards" in this study, moving from the first section's concentration on in-depth studies of foundling plots — which inevitably shade into refugee narratives — in late twentieth-century and contemporary fiction by, among others, Caryl Phillips, Anne Michaels, and W. G. Sebald to offer a fresh stance on Shakespearean adaptations of the archetypal foundling plot in plays such as *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

It's a bold strategy and has strengths and weaknesses at various times. There is inevitably a strong emphasis on plot and genre and as a result, a welcome amount of time is dedicated to close reading. Estrin identifies in the various reworkings of the foundling plot with which she engages a particular kinship between stories of family and nation. She is especially interested in plot variations that lead to a form of gender revisionism, and she is strongly shaped and informed throughout by the theories of Luce Irigaray and her suggestive phrase, "a new cultural elaboration," in understanding her case-study adaptations (including Shakespeare's plays) (Irigaray 2012, 139).

Part One is labelled "Contemporary Pasts" and begins with a sensitive and engaged reading of Caryl Phillips under-studied *The Nature of Blood* (1997) which contains, among other things, conscious reworkings of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* refracted through ruminations on various moments of historical trauma over a five-century period including, inevitably, the Holocaust and the foundation of modern-day Israel as well as the parallel trauma for the Palestinian peoples that this particular nation formation entailed. Estrin is alert to the disruptions of form that Phillips employs to great effect in this complex and haunting novel.

From Phillips, Estrin moves to examine Liz Jensen's 1998 *Ark Baby*, a critically acclaimed text that has also been a limited focus of critical analysis. She regards the novel as a further example, along with Phillips's oeuvre, of the "current formal 'reinvention' of traditional British fiction" (p. 47), and this is something I would like to have heard more on. The novel is invested in discussions of Darwinian-informed genetic engineering but Estrin also identifies buried allusions to *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Comedy of Errors*. How useful or satisfying this chapter would be for students and scholars of Shakespearean adaptation is something of a moot point; the chapter is essentially a critical close reading of Jensen in which the Shakespearean echoes play a secondary role, but it makes interesting observations on the relationship between foundling plots and the evolutionary narrative that has dominated scientific discourse since the nineteenth century. The novel takes place in two time periods, 1845 and 2005, and explores complex notions of bloodlines and inheritance that clearly relate it back to the preceding discussion of *The Nature of Blood*.

I had not expected to find W. G. Sebald in a book entitled *Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction* (and it is perhaps telling that the author confesses that the study has gone through various titles on its way to print; there is a problem of categorization here). But in the "traumatic dis-remembering" of Sebald's 2001 radical "memory text" Austerlitz, Estrin finds analogues to Shakespeare's lyric and foundling plots. She cites, in particular, *Hamlet* and *Pericles* as informing texts for her purposes in this chapter. There are undoubtedly sensitive and perceptive readings of Sebald's text presented here but in the end, I found the Shakespearean connections far too buried and too diffuse to really do the work I would expect in a monograph bearing the title of *Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction*. The theme of memory forms the bridge from the chapter on Sebald to that on Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) and beyond to the more extended discussions of Shakespeare in the book's second section. Memory becomes a means of thinking about recovery and revival (not least of that which is presumed dead) and in this way, becomes a means of thinking about *The Winter's Tale* and *Hamlet*.

The section on "Shakespearean Presents" is formed of three chapters, each focusing on a single play; Estrin's hope is that these readings are informed by the contemporary fiction studies that have gone before. I like the idea of reading backwards very much, and the approach chimes with some of Linda Hutcheon's recent theorizing of ways in which we might teach and practice adaptation studies in the future, but the process is only partly formed and partially achieved in this study (Hutcheon 2006, *passim*). The chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* returns in earnest to earlier points raised around gender revisionism and plot. It is clear that Estrin regards Shakespeare as much as an adapter himself as a focus for contemporary adaptations, and there is some welcome attention to the Gobbo subplot, which can often seem so unsatisfactory in performances of the play.

She reads Gobbo's story as a partial foundling plot in which his apprenticeship stands for a "form of adoption" (p. 115). There is much interest in mythology in the reading of the Portia/Bassanio/Antonio triad, but this was yet a further example for me of the study trying to achieve too many things at once and lacking a coherent central through-line.

The chapter on *Othello* that follows is fashioned in particular around ruminations on Desdemona's lyric narrative of her nurse "Barbary" in the so-called willow scene. There are interesting observations on the relationship between space and memory, and here Estrin also makes use of Philip Roth's notion of "fictional amplification" to explore the ways in which *Othello* consistently fashions something from nothing (Roth 2007, 23). In themselves these are interesting and challenging analyses, but their relationship to the earlier case studies of contemporary fiction was never entirely clear to me. In the final Shakespeare-focused chapter of her study, Estrin turns, unsurprisingly, to *The Winter's Tale*, which has constituted a kind of foundation text for her preceding observations on the "founding plot" and its recurrence in drama and fiction. This is in fact one of the few moments in the study when the performative conditions of Shakespeare's own time, and indeed the status of these texts as scripts for performance — as playtexts — becomes visible when Estrin ponders the sexually charged language of the Sicilian court scenes and the particular effect of all-male acting companies on the understanding of the staging of these moments in the play. There is more on mythology (for the most part Ovidian in provenance) and on the spatial turn that connects this chapter to the previous Shakespearean play discussions, but the relationship to the first section of the study remains fleeting at best.

The study is then rounded off by a similarly unsatisfactory foray into contemporary artworks on gender and identity, which by this point seem to have travelled such a distance from the opening premise of the study that their validity is questionable. While interesting in themselves and theoretically challenging, these analyses seemed not to be anchored securely enough in the claims to Shakespearean interests in what preceded or, indeed, in the title of the study to win their place securely.

This is a difficult book to review and a difficult review to write. Estrin is a strong close reader, and there is much of interest here, in particular for the student of the contemporary authors she elects to study. There are some helpful theoretical position-takings and challenges embedded in its pages. A satisfactory or sustained study of *Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction*, however, it is not. Not all books do quite what they say on the cover.

## References

- Estrin, Barbara L. 2012. *Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction: Theorizing Foundling and Lyric Plots*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
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