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Book Review

Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page by Harry Berger, Jr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Pp. xv + 178. $25.00.

Harry Berger Jr's. strong voice in Renaissance studies was first heard almost thirty-five years ago in *The Allegorical Temper: Vision and Reality in Book II of Spenser's "Faerie Queene."* Berger's argument, that Spenser's allegory is essentially dramatic and visionary rather than didactic, gave notice even then that his function as critic was not to canonize but to provoke. In the years ensuing, Berger has produced a steady flow of difficult, open-ended essays designed as much to subvert received methods of positivist interpretation as to establish a cultural and literary theory of his own. These remarkable essays—collected in 1988 by the University of California Press as *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*—certainly do reveal an ongoing attempt to develop an inclusive theory about Renaissance literature and culture. But the theory is self-expanding rather than self-defining; the attempt is to integrate rather than isolate the interpenetrating ideas and cultural forces that made the Renaissance unique. The key to this uniqueness, for Berger, is the Renaissance imagination and its power to envision and to invent, to present and represent versions of "reality" that give the mind almost limitless power to assimilate and reshape culture. Berger's increasingly interdisciplinary perspectives reveal, furthermore, a keen awareness of and sensitivity to the effects of social and political relativism in the visual arts and other forms of non-verbal "fiction" as well. As John Lynch concludes in his introduction to *Second World,* literature for Berger is not so much artifacts communicating meaning and structure as "cultural documents charged with meaning about the mind and culture by which they were produced" (xi). Clearly, therefore, Berger is the godfather of the New Historicism and the "California School" of cultural critics, all of whom variously acknowledge their intellectual debt to him.

Berger's concern in *Imaginary Audition* is more focused and timely than in any of his earlier work, his role as agent provocateur more sharply defined than ever. In this brief but rigorously argued book, Berger joins the fray in the ongoing debate over how to interpret Shakespeare. He caricatures the antagonists in this discussion as "slit-eyed analysts" on the one hand, and "wide-eyed playgoers" on the other. The former are represented by Sigurd Burkhardt and those academicians who read the plays slowly and carefully with an eye toward topical allusions, word-counts, stylistic patterns, and the like. The latter are the theatre-centered critics who, following J. L. Styan, believe it is nonsense to speak of Shakespearean meaning other than that communicated directly across the footlights to an immediate and unbiased audience whose responses are trustworthy as interpretive consensus. The theatre-centered group has stirred great attention in recent years, as any up-to-date bibliography of metatheatrical and metapoetic criticism will reveal. Predictably, this school monopolizes Berger's attention as well. His rather disparaging moniker for the cult—all those who argue most forcefully that reading is irresponsible unless it imitates playgoing—is the "New Histrionicism" (with an ironic and self-congratulating pun on the New Historicism, I suspect).

Berger's impatience with the New Histrionicism of Styan and more recent critics such as Richard Levin and Gary Taylor is balanced to some degree by

his recognition of the dangers of "armchair interpretation," especially its tendency to ignore not only the constraints that stage-centered criticism imposes on interpretation, but the theatrical circumstances as well of the dramatic text itself. In response to the excesses of both schools, Berger proposes a *via media* reading of Shakespeare that operates between the theatrical model of stage-centered reading and the text-centered approach practiced by the old school of academic scrutiny. Berger's critical method in this regard might be called the literary model of stage-centered reading—an attempt to vitalize text-centered reading by focusing on the "interlocutory politics and theatrical features of performed drama," and so avoid the "most suspicious and anti-theatrical" of armchair readings (xiv). Berger's instinct is to summon once again the relativistic intelligence that fostered the New Historicism and to use it here in the undermining of polemical positions on both sides. It is the New Histrionicism, however, which receives the brunt of his challenge.

Before he defines and illustrates the reading technique which gives the book its title, Berger devotes forty-five pages to the detailed destruction of Levin's critique of slit-eyed analysis of Shakespeare (*New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama*, 1979) and Taylor's defense of wide-eyed playgoing (*Moment by Moment by Shakespeare*, 1985). Levin's attack on readers who take the time necessary to find or invent a text not purposed by Shakespeare turns out to be especially vulnerable to Berger's reasoning. Levin's critique of text-centered interpretation hinges on the intentions of the playwright, the actability of the interpretation, and the observable consensus of the audience as regards that interpretation. Berger shows how these three criteria become "highly suspect" when considered separately. Exactly who is this consenting audience? What about the intentional fallacy? For Berger, the argument is circular, since the "'intending dramatist' is transparently a character created by Levin to validate his approach" (11). Plays, Berger concludes, are like other texts that are "intended" for interpretation, and their intentions are "dissociated from those of their authors and subject to continual cultural revision" (24).

Taylor calls his theory "critical hedonism," maintaining that the pleasure of sequential moments experienced by the "innocent" playgoer, unconstrained by the presuppositions about the play and/or the "laws of graphic inscription" enforced by the text, is the only valid basis of interpretation (39). Only the innocent playgoer, he says, can avoid the transgression of "reading a play backwards"—imposing on the text or the theatrical experience what one already knows about the play (33). Berger finds this notion absurd, and he objects to Taylor's "chip-on-the-shoulder" attitude toward literary critics, whom Taylor caricatures as "ego-crazed deviants" (25). According to Taylor, an audience's pleasure is limited or conditioned by the constraints of short-term memory, and it will always accept "the simplest hypothesis which explains the data" from a play (26). Berger's response to these claims is delineated at length, but it is actually rather simple. He describes the "innocent playgoer" as an arbitrary, hyperbolic, strategic construct, no more empirical than its correlative—the play reduced to pure temporal sequence. His conclusion: "Any performance that isn't sheer improvisation is the citation and recitation of a text, and even a playgoer who has never read the text, who has seen the play only once before and remembers it either roughly or in detail but at least

well enough to compare the two productions, is no longer innocent. Any actual performance is the site of convergent, but not necessarily congruent, interpretations" (38). For the playgoer to "pretend" to be innocent, furthermore, only serves to validate the system of text/reader/experienced playgoer against which Taylor's system is posited.

"Imaginary Audition" is a reading technique or process which retains the New Critical reverence for the integrity of the text while simultaneously expanding the reader's perspective to accommodate both the constraints and the possibilities of actual play-going audition. This exercise of the imagination requires the reader to "listen with his eyes" to the speech acts of a given character not only in terms of their probable interlocutory effects on other characters, but also in terms of their effects on the speaker himself while, as in soliloquy, he continually fashions and refashions himself in an ongoing self-interpretive and representational speech act. Such audition allows the reader to stay in touch with both how a character speaks and how he hears himself representing himself to others as he continuously shapes and exploits the theatrical/political possibilities and power of his own speech acts. The technique opens up interesting interpretive options for the reader, as Berger illustrates in an extended ninety-page analysis of just two scenes from *Richard II*. The going here is meticulous, slow, and rather tedious at times, but Berger has asked for our patience. "The slowness," he says, "derives in part from the complex and multidirectional acts of attention that characterize . . . imaginary audition" (45).

Berger's analysis of *RII* 3.2 has been published previously (*ELH* 55.4 [1988]: 755–96), so I shall illustrate the workings of imaginary audition in *Richard II* by looking at Berger's analysis of the famous deposition scene (4.1), where Richard relinquishes the crown to Bolingbroke. As we might expect, Berger's reading is presented as a strenuous challenge to the standard interpretation of the scene. He objects to the canonical view of Richard as a weak king who happens to be good at theatrical posturing and lyrical wallowing in his own passive misery. For Berger, Richard's theatrical effectiveness—the drama of his speech acts—"focuses those conflicts of power and struggles for authority that dominate the dialogue" (75). In other words, Richard's interlocutory presentations of himself are political, not merely lyrical; his expressions of apparent spiritual despair reveal an angry political assertiveness that both incriminates Bolingbroke and allows Richard to gain power over him, even as Richard revels in the representation of his own powerlessness. One of Berger's examples centers on Richard's much-discussed "bucket" metaphor (4.1.181–89), in which the king depicts himself as the bottom bucket "full of tears," forever drawing Bolingbroke's top bucket up to the pulley on the royal water well. The typical reader or play-goer, according to Berger, listens to Richard's speech only with Bolingbroke's ears and accordingly assigns the top bucket to the "strong, silent, pragmatic usurper," and the bottom bucket to the "weak, wordy, self-indulgent" king (47). Imaginary audition, however, allows us to hear Richard listening to himself as he improvises an image system that renders him the heavy or substantial bucket (the rightful bucket in the well of sovereignty, Berger might have added), and Bolingbroke the light or insubstantial bucket "dancing in the air" from Richard's power to send him up. If the upper bucket is the crown of the

new king, furthermore, it must be lowered to accommodate the successor, suggesting downfall and disgrace. The exchange is political, and suggests that the "tearful victim is the dominant force" in the metaphorical representation (48).

Later in the scene, Richard continues his metaphorical performance by comparing himself to a "mockery king of snow,/ Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,/ To melt myself away in water-drops" (260–62). The standard view—even among such metadramatic critics as James Calderwood—is that this image of himself reveals Richard at the moment when the lower bucket hits the bottom, a picture of absolute dissolution and loss of identity. And almost everyone recognizes the allusion here to the despairing Doctor Faustus, who, at the last, pleads for his soul to be "changed into small water-drops/ And fall into the ocean. . . ." Contrition and deprivation indeed may be exactly what Bolingbroke wishes to hear at this point. But an auditor may hear another representation of Richard. Shakespeare has Richard speak in Faustian terms to underscore their similar compulsion to invent a self in opposition to powerful authority (Faustus, to Satan; Richard, to Bolingbroke). The difference is that Faustus' "impulse to self-cancellation" is a desperate attempt to evade an ultimate confrontation, while Richard's is a presentation designed actually to master it (65–66). Faustus' is despairing soliloquy; Richard's is political speech act. Here Berger calls upon the observations and terminology of his friend and protege Stephen Greenblatt to flesh out his interpretation. Greenblatt (the acknowledged founder of the New Historicism) has written of the Marlovian hero's "willful courting of disaster . . . motivated by his will to self-fashioning" (65). Richard engages himself in similar self-fashioning, or reinvention of the self, but for a different (political) purpose. It is a "continuous act of improvisation" (Greenblatt's term) whereby Richard can reinvent himself as the "master of his own deposition and the victim of usurpation" (66). In lines 239–42 Richard actually represents himself as Christ, surrounded by usurping Pilates. The dissolving King of Snow image has the political effect, then, of a final malediction—like Faustus', but for a different purpose—directed at Bolingbroke. Berger concludes that "if Richard is to be damned, he will take Bolingbroke with him and will leave his malediction on future regimes" (66).

Berger's relentless pursuit of his argument is slowed by the narrowness of his scope and the rigorous exploration of the myriad interpretive possibilities opened up by imaginary audition. Hence, what looks like a short book turns out to be a rather long book. At times Berger's method simply becomes overkill in a small space. Still, *Imaginary Audition* is interesting reading, for the most part, and Berger is usually convincing. I admire his familiarity with a wide range of critical opinion and his provocative impulses in dealing with it. To watch his aggressive intellect at work, furthermore, can be exhilarating. The book is unbalanced, however. The reader wishes a wider-ranging field of textual instance for Berger's illustrations, and the attacks on Levin and Taylor seem oddly disjointed from the analyses of *Richard II*. There is a sense of unfinished business at the end, as well, but the open-endedness is typical of Berger's best work in the essays; it is inevitable, furthermore, in a work with such a confined focus. Indeed, Berger wishes this book to be "a kind of prolegomenon" to a larger work-in-progress on the Henriad. I look foward to

his future work, but I hope for a topic of greater moment, and a return to the encompassing insight and sweeping synthesis that have made his work unique.

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