



Shakespeare, Court Dramatist.

Richard Dutton

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Shakespeare, Court Dramatist. By Richard Dutton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-19-877774-8. x + 321 pp. £35.

The dust jacket for Richard Dutton's provocative new book *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* features a luminous photograph of the dais end of Hampton Court Palace's Tudor Great Hall, one of the implied places of performance for many of the plays the book examines. Yet, the cover is misleading: the volume is not about palaces, the court, or even Shakespeare himself, *per se*. It also is not—as many books about early modern court performance tend to be—about how plays were presented, or the experiences of their players, monarchs, and auditors. Rather, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* reconstructs the relationship between Shakespeare's surviving play texts and the process by which they were performed at court. In doing so, Dutton seeks to center the court in scholarly conversations about Renaissance drama, paying particular attention to the texts themselves. In shifting the conversation from the spaces and mechanisms of court performances to their relationship with the text, he has produced one of the most important volumes about early modern court drama in some time.

Dutton's central thesis emerges in the opening lines: "Shakespeare's plays were frequently and specifically revised for presentation at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I. And...the texts which have come down to us often bear the marks of those revisions" (1). In advancing a theory of revision by the playwright specifically for court, Dutton challenges a century of critical theorizing about why many of Shakespeare's surviving play texts contain substantive, and sometimes jarring, differences between them. Further, by focusing his analyses of Shakespeare's plays on the contentious collection of so-called "bad" quartos, Dutton argues that the shorter quartos represent early, badly-compiled versions of the plays that were later revised for court performances, rather than the edited, cut, or reconstructed remnants of the originals. One of the "marks" of revision for court, he contends, is the length of the play, namely that the "minimal" versions of Shakespeare's plays that survive in more than one form were written "to fit the time available, and only expanded when a specific demand arose for them to be" (77). Essentially, the civic and environmental restrictions that limited performances in public playhouses to roughly two to two-and-a-half hours, as Dutton estimates, did not apply at court, where performances often did not even begin until 9:00 or later in the evening, and are known to have lasted until well after midnight. The longer versions of Shakespeare's plays in the quartos and the 1623 Folio were, thus, shaped by the playwright himself for his companies' visits to court,

where lengthy and rhetorically complicated plays would have found a “ready audience” (1).

The book is divided into two main parts, “Playing and the Court” and “Shakespeare’s Multiple Texts”, allowing Dutton to fully address the textual and contextual aspects of this thesis. The first three chapters of part one parse the relationship between the court and the players, via the Master of the Revels, and analyze the extrinsic evidence to support Dutton’s contention that court performance was the catalyst for revision. He offers new perspectives on how playing companies took advantage of both the old “gift-exchange economy” from which their obligations to the court were based, and the burgeoning proto-capitalist economy from which they made most of their money (14). The need for players to remain under aristocratic or royal patronage was in large part because the court insulated the companies from regulatory affronts by the City of London. The court thus exerted a primary claim on the practice of playing, which it preemptively regulated in order to stake a claim over the City authorities, who would have “inevitably cut across the authority of the court” (17). Dutton builds this argument through a convincing reconsideration of the relationships between the companies and the court as mediated through their close work with the Master of the Revels, who, especially in the case of Edmund Tilney, the book paints as a both a businessman on good working terms with the players, and a creative agent, well-qualified to oversee the presentations of plays before they were performed (54). If we are to take the book on the weight of its two central contentions—that playwrights, namely Shakespeare, habitually revised their plays and that they did so for court performances—it is the second contention that stands on shakier hypothetical ground. However, Dutton accounts for this lack of certainty by offering that as conjecture goes, revision-for-court resolves more textual puzzles than it presents.

Indeed, in part two of the book, Dutton makes good on his promises by offering original readings of some of the variations between Shakespeare’s “bad” quartos of *Henry V*, 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and their longer versions. Dutton’s analysis of these plays works to prove that Shakespeare was a frequent and intentional reviser of his plays, and that those particular revisions were more suitable as court offerings. Narrowing his focus to plays that survive in multiple quartos, Dutton draws on textual comparisons to show why, in the specific case of Shakespeare, we have enough internal evidence to make a strong case for a process of revision-for-court, thus centralizing the court in a textual debate that has to this point largely set aside the influence on the creative process of playwriting during this period. Such an argument requires addressing the many alternative theories concerning the relationship between Shakespeare’s 1623

Folio and its precedent quartos that editorial criticism has produced in the last century, particularly since the reign of the New Bibliographers during the first half of the twentieth century. On this count, Dutton offers an impressive synthesis of the dominant criticism in chapter four, a bridge between both parts of the book. He proposes here a reconsideration of many textual norms that have driven conversations about variations in Shakespeare's surviving play texts, and combats the counterclaims likely to raise debate.

A meticulously argued and insightful study, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* deserves serious consideration by students and scholars of early modern drama and Shakespeare's texts, as it reshapes the narrative threads that have long dominated conversations about the relationships between plays and their texts, authors, and performances. Dutton's argument, that the best versions of Shakespeare's plays were tied to the court, not the "democratic melting pot of the Globe and other public theatres" (289), will no doubt have its detractors. However, this would be disregarding the soul of the book and its message: if we deny Dutton's thesis, we risk losing a fuller understanding of the relationship between art and the centers of political power in a time when these relationships were being redefined and reframed. All in all, this is a forceful work of scholarship.

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