

Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

1998

Review Of "The Oxford Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale" Edited By S. Orgel

Nora Johnson

Swarthmore College, njohnso1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>



Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Nora Johnson. (1998). "Review Of "The Oxford Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale" Edited By S. Orgel". *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Volume 49, Issue 4. 432-434. DOI: 10.2307/2902239
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/11>

An [accessible version](#) of this publication has been made available courtesy of Swarthmore College Libraries. For further accessibility assistance, please contact openaccess@swarthmore.edu with the title or URL of any relevant works.

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

1998

Review Of "The Oxford Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale" Edited By S. Orgel

Nora Johnson

Swarthmore College, njohnso1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Nora Johnson. (1998). "Review Of "The Oxford Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale" Edited By S. Orgel". *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Volume 49, Issue 4. 432-434. DOI: 10.2307/2902239
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/11>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Book Reviews

The Oxford Shakespeare *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by STEPHEN ORGEL. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. viii + 295. \$72.00 cloth, \$6.95 paper.

Reviewed by NORA JOHNSON

Like his 1987 edition of *The Tempest*, Stephen Orgel's edition of *The Winter's Tale* for the Oxford Shakespeare is distinguished by its editorial restraint and its attention to historical context. First in a wave of new editions of the play, this text fulfills the aims of its series: to be scholarly, up-to-date, innovative, attentive to matters of staging, and generous in the use of illustration. The volume is a resource for scholars, but its strengths—including its accessible and informative introduction—are by no means wasted on undergraduates.

The text itself offers an appreciable challenge to those past editors who would explain away the difficulties of the First Folio's language, including at some moments the editors of the Oxford *Complete Works*. In both his glosses and his editorial decisions, Orgel defends difficult Folio readings. On Hermione's famously elliptical "With what encounter so uncurent I / Have strained t'appear thus" (3.2.48–49), for instance, Orgel is characteristically frank about the limits of editorial practice. Here, Pafford's influential 1963 Arden edition offers a paraphrase while confidently citing the *Oxford English Dictionary* and a mystifying passage from *Pandosto*; Orgel, on the other hand, cites the *OED* but also notes that the majority of eighteenth-century editors found the speech "incomprehensible" (144n). Such information is very much at the heart of this edition; Orgel consistently refuses to sanction just one reading when several are plausible, preferring instead to stress the real difficulties editors have faced when confronted by the text. A similar preference for the First Folio's linguistic obscurity leads him to diverge from Pafford, Schanzer, and Bevington when they repoint Time's "Leontes leaving, / Th'effects of his fond jealousies so grieving / That he shuts up himself" (4.1.17–19). The commonly accepted Second Folio version, which Orgel rejects, includes the lines that follow ("Imagine me / . . . that I now may be / In fair Bohemia") within the sentence, thus providing "I" as a welcome subject for line 17's "leaving." The determination with which Orgel retains the more difficult reading here is instructive. In this case, by Orgel's own admission, it makes an already-puzzling speech even more contorted, but in doing so, the edition makes its most striking contribution; Orgel takes seriously the challenges of historical difference, and he has managed to produce a readable text for this play that nevertheless preserves its cultural unfamiliarity. He thus promises some resolution of the conflict between the demand for accessible, authoritative Shakespeare editions and the increasing scholarly preference for "un-editing" these same texts, for exposing the assumptions and practices that govern modern textual coherence.

Perhaps the most vexing and intriguing textual knot in the play, at 1.2.136–37, reads as follows in the First Folio: "Can thy Dam, may't be / Affection? thy Intention stabs the Center." As Orgel points out, the dominant editorial tradition, which derives from Rowe's even more radical emendation, makes "Affection" the subject of its own sentence: "Can thy Dam? May't be? / Affection! thy Intention stabs the Center." In retaining the Folio punctuation, Orgel demonstrates the extent to which earlier editors have been willing to introduce changes that are, in a strict sense, unnecessary. While the Folio reading is difficult, it makes undeniable sense. Moreover, because "thy" in the Folio is so richly without referent, Orgel's preference for the difficult reading actually encourages the kinds of interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* that have powerfully

engaged recent critics. Imagine, for instance, what Stanley Cavell might do with this newly ambiguous “thy”: the intention in question might belong to Hermione or to Leontes; it might belong to affection; or it might, tantalizingly, be linked syntactically to Mamillius (“thy Dam. . . . thy Intention”). By choosing not to edit, Orgel has in fact empowered reading and performance. This edition will do much to reassure those who fear Shakespeare is unreadable without intrusive emendation.

This is not to imply, however, that the edition fails to intervene when necessary. *The Winter's Tale* is a Ralph Crane manuscript; as such, it presents a predictable set of questions about stage directions, massed entrances, and punctuation. Orgel proves a judicious emender at such moments. Virtually all the current editions stipulate that Hermione “faints” or “swoons” in 3.2, for instance, when she learns of Mamillius’s death. Orgel confines himself to “*Hermione falls to the ground,*” wisely refraining from speculation about the ontological status of her collapse. Moreover, Orgel has managed to avoid supplying the intrusive glosses that Pafford is known for while nevertheless adding many helpful references, particularly historical ones. Readers learn the origin of *barricado*, the legislative background of “o’er-dyed blacks,” the laws regarding the slander of a queen, and the reason that furlongs are associated with racing.

Other notes connect Leontes’s assumptions of royal prerogative with those of James I, and while those connections are provocative, they point toward a mode of historicizing that some readers will find problematic. Much depends on the Stuart court in this edition, especially in Orgel’s introductory essay. In a section called “Mysteries of State,” for instance, Orgel argues that *The Winter's Tale*’s many obscure speeches may be so in part because the language of the play mirrors what he calls “the language of authority”: “James represented the royal mind as programmatically occluded, a politic obscurantism that may certainly be reflected in the linguistic obscurity of Leontes’ (or Macbeth’s, or *Cymbeline*’s) court” (13). Such court-centered historicism—however carefully nuanced—has rightly been taken to task for emphasizing hegemonic power. Though Orgel reads *The Winter's Tale* as a challenge, at least on some levels, to monarchical power, he nevertheless grants the monarch considerable influence over the verbal texture of this play. As Orgel remarks about other critical approaches, however, it is by no means clear that the language of royal self-mystification should apply to Hermione or Antigonus as it does to Leontes. And all of these questions become even more vexed when one imagines applying them to the pastiche of dramatic modes in a play such as *Cymbeline*. The risk here lies in substituting a broadly historical referent—“authority”—for the kinds of verbal indeterminacy that Orgel himself values as a textual editor.

In a similar vein, one that will be familiar to those who know Orgel’s essay “The Poetics of Incomprehensibility” (*SQ* 42 [1991]: 431–37), the Oxford introduction makes the case that early modern theatrical audiences had expectations about interpretation very different from those of postmodern audiences. He notes that unexplained—and sometimes inexplicable—iconography was a familiar feature of pageant and masque, analogous to the “dark conceit” in the work of Jonson or Chapman. I miss the sustained argument that would establish obscurity as a popular dramatic aesthetic; to read the drama—even in its romance mode—as analogous to masque is to risk glossing over a whole series of institutional differences. Again, however, Orgel’s claims are provocative in their assumption of historical difference and clearly point toward overlooked approaches to the question of language and meaning in the play.

A few additional points: the stage history of *The Winter's Tale* is concise and focused, using particular examples to highlight significant historical changes in the play’s reception. This section is well illustrated, including a particularly wonderful photograph of a young Ellen Terry playing Mamillius to Charles Keane’s Leontes. Appendixes are

clear and helpful, providing Simon Forman's account of the play, Greene's *Pandosto* (used to good effect in the textual notes), and a series of early settings for the play's various songs. Among the numerous topics covered insightfully in the introduction are important distinctions between religious imagery and invocations of magic in this period. Orgel's work on the political nature of Paulina's gallery is similarly interesting, though the objections raised above to authority-based readings also apply here. In light of the current interest in early modern friendship and the minor tradition of reading this play for homoerotic content, however, it seems important to consider male relationships in more depth than Orgel does.

All told, Orgel has set a high standard for the editions of this play that are to be published in the coming years. Even the most controversial aspects of this volume will make for stimulating class discussion and provocative scholarship.

The Shakespearian Playing Companies. By ANDREW GURR. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x + 483. \$00.00 cloth.

Reviewed by ANNE LANCASHIRE

The title of Andrew Gurr's new book might suggest to prospective readers a history either of the playing companies to which Shakespeare himself belonged; of playing companies in general during Shakespeare's working theatrical career (c. 1587–1613); or even, given how Gurr himself defines "the Shakespearian company" on page 8, of playing companies (roughly during the same period) set up, like the Chamberlain's/King's Men, on an actor-sharer basis. But Gurr's goal is much broader: a history of the operations of "the London Companies from the 1560s to 1642" (1).

This is a huge and exciting topic, involving the weaving together of a century of work by many theater historians and, for new information on provincial touring, above all making use of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project. (Gurr went through both published and unpublished materials in the project's office; his lists of companies' traveling performances come in significant part from this source.) Gurr attempts to draw everything together into what he describes as simultaneously a reference work and an interpretative history (3). The first part of the book deals, largely chronologically, with playing-company characteristics and history generally: for example, the patronage system, traveling, and modes of operation in London. The second part provides, again chronologically (thus creating some repetition), individual histories—with lists of plays, playhouses, recorded performances, etc.—of no fewer than thirty-five playing companies "known to have performed in London between about 1560 and 1642" (161). Surprisingly, four of the thirty-five have no known London performances listed; Gurr argues that a company chosen in the 1570s to perform at court would be a company that "had been making its presence felt in London" (161 and 167). Three of these four companies have only one court performance listed (178, 180, and 227), which investigation shows to have been at Hampton Court or Greenwich; otherwise only provincial performances are known. The fourth is noted by Gurr himself to be non-London (313). A few other companies also seem linked to London only tenuously.

The history of English theater generally, from the 1560s (or more often 1570s) to 1642, has been often told. New scholarship keeps the picture changing, but long-held assumptions are not easily discarded. One of the book's strengths—apart from its companies focus—is its incorporation of recent scholarly emphases on the importance, for a company's fortunes, of its patron(s)'s political maneuverings at court. One of its weaknesses is a reluctance, despite its own contents, to give up old assumptions, such as the insecurity of a traveling company (44), even though Gurr himself notes that