

Particularly intriguing is Coursen's discussion of Stoppard's movie version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1990), a film that abandons many of the features of the stage play. Coursen is fascinated by this film's revelation—in the midst of its playful deconstruction of the anxious seemings at the heart of Hamlet's (and *Hamlet's*) world, in the midst of its filmic undoing of the theatrical premises that define "the very cunning of the scene," not merely of Shakespeare's play but Stoppard's, too,—of *mimesis*, an imitation of an action, an archetype. For Coursen, Stoppard's film, "mov[ing] in and out of realities," rings out *Hamlet's* question—and ours—on each of the film's expanding and collapsing circles: "How does art condition reality, transmit it, through various frames from obvious artifice to imitation that comes close to showing whatever truth may be?" (170). By examining the playful "intersections" that both connect and vex the two traditions—theatrical and filmic—of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, as well as the postmodern energies—simultaneously collaborative and deconstructing—that bind Stoppard's play to Shakespeare's, Coursen recovers something that is both his own and not his own. Stoppard's "play becomes a film, visualizing what is discussed in the play. In the film, meanings hover around things—like the Player's manuscript chest, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wait to die again, perhaps only to be mimed before a jeering row of peasants" (168).

Here is an archetype as much "Shakespearean" as "postmodern," as much "postmodern" as "Stoppardian." It is about a deep suspicion of meanings, rhapsodies of words, even of our own essential beings, our purposes and ends, or the playful and terrifying doubleness of "seems" and "is." Two accidental actors look at a chest containing the script that contains and constructs them. They may indeed come to life, and death, again but only if the next audience somehow learns "to awake [its] faith."

Macbeth: Texts and Contexts. Edited by WILLIAM C. CARROLL.
Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press,
1999. Pp. xxii + 346. Illus. \$39.95 cloth.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts. Edited by GAIL
KERN PASTER and SKILES HOWARD. Boston and New York:
Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1999. Pp. xx + 394. Illus.
\$39.95 cloth.

Reviewed by JOAN PONG LINTON

Readers interested in a historicized understanding of Shakespeare's plays will find much to like in the Bedford critical editions of *Macbeth* by William A. Carroll and of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard. As the editors make clear in their introductions, their primary aim is to provide historical and discursive contexts for the plays. Without assuming specialized knowledge of English history and society in Shakespeare's day, both editions are designed to invite critical engagement with the plays by including selections from contemporary sources that enrich readers' knowledge of the politics and culture in which the plays participate. The sources are

organized into chapters, with commentary on their thematic relevance and with headnotes and annotations that render them readily accessible to readers. The illustrations—reproductions of woodcuts and title pages, musical scores (Paster and Howard), genealogy charts (Carroll), etc.—capture for readers parts of the period's material culture. The result in each case is a richly textured slice of early modern English culture and history, providing multiple starting points for scholarly inquiry.

While they share a historical interest, the two editions differ in the critical approaches employed, a difference that accounts for their choice of source materials and interpretive strategies. Carroll's new-historicist approach to *Macbeth* appropriately highlights the play's relevance to James I's succession to the English crown. The bulk of the sources are devoted to making these connections visible, with selections ranging from competing historical narratives of Macbeth and English constructions of Scotland (chapters 1 and 2) to treatises on the topics of sovereignty, treason, and witchcraft (chapters 3, 4, and 5), topics on which James himself had written. The headnotes and commentary are highly illuminating and guide readers through the intricate politics of royal succession and religious reformation. It is fascinating, for example, to see the extent to which contemporary opinions on the royal succession were interwoven with ongoing political maneuverings, so that the play's reference to "the evil" (4.3.147–60) acquires particular salience in connection with James's use of the healing royal touch in establishing his legitimacy as England's ruler (224). Again, in contextualizing representations of Macbeth, the headnotes identify for readers the ideological positions of various historians and the political debates in which their writings intervened. The editorial comments further indicate the political uses to which the narratives of Macbeth were put, including Shakespeare's reshaping of historical materials to his dramatic purposes and Restoration redactions of Shakespeare's play. The effect is to foreground the period's plural conception of history as the basis of an informed skepticism that makes for serious historical inquiry. As Carroll himself makes clear, his "primary purpose" in presenting sources is "so that readers may make their own judgments" (3).

At times, however, the editor's desire not to predispose readers' judgments leaves uncertain how some sources are to be located politically and culturally. The problem is specific to chapter 6 in Carroll's edition of *Macbeth*, which returns to topics treated in previous chapters from the perspective of their implications for women. The shortest of the book's six chapters, "Discourses of the Feminine" features a relatively small number of sources that focus largely on the maternal and on biological explanations of woman's nature. Although the selections are justified in terms of Macduff's caesarean birth and Lady Macbeth's references to motherhood and unsexing herself, there is room for more extensive discussion of the social context in which these gendered discourses were produced and fostered. Commentary may also locate the sources' essentialist notions of women's nature in a broader range of writings on women, thus enabling readers to bring to these gender constructions the same kind of informed skepticism they develop in previous chapters.

If an interest in dynastic politics underlies Carroll's edition of *Macbeth*, attention to the cultural politics of gender is central to Paster and Howard's edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Two of four chapters—"The Making of Men" (chapter 2) and "Female Attachments and Family Ties" (chapter 3)—present and discuss source materials

directly related to this topic. A feminist-materialist approach likewise frames the remaining chapters, which deal with more general aspects of cultural life, namely, "Popular Festivals and Court Celebrations" and popular beliefs about the "Natural and Supernatural" (chapters 1 and 4). Like Carroll, Paster and Howard are judicious in evaluating sources for readers, as seen in their balanced analysis of John Stow's *Survey of London* as a "conservative fantasy of 'merry England'" (96). At the same time, however, Paster and Howard foreground the situated positions from which they operate, showing how their feminist agenda informs their selection of sources and the interpretive connections they make between these sources and the play. In addressing the gender implications of genre choices, the editors write: "The selections below are intended to challenge the comic resolution in which marriage is universally desired, female communities vanquished, and female attachments dissolved" (194). Accordingly, in dealing with two sources of the myth of the Amazons—Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* and Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*—the editors "have chosen Pizan over Plutarch as the Amazons' primary advocate" (197). While acknowledging that Shakespeare may not have read Brian Anslay's English translation of Pizan (c. 1521), the editors also summarize Plutarch's story, citing from the North translation to give a taste of its misogynist representation of the Amazons.

Such critical intervention is refreshing, as it draws attention to texts that have often been overlooked in favor of sources that tend to reinforce dominant cultural and gender ideologies. In making visible a greater diversity in contemporary attitudes toward issues of gender, Paster and Howard enable readers to constitute their own historical inquiry with a clear sense of what is at stake in such decisions. In moving between the play's world and early modern society, the editors also make visible how gender ideologies come into play when gender differences become imbricated with other facts of life—with social and religious differences, with natural and social forces from bad harvests to war—at a time when England was ruled by a woman. While the play's connections with Elizabeth I seem overplayed at times, the discussion is on the whole powerfully instructive because the editors engage diverse scholarly interpretations, locating their own feminist insights in a larger critical conversation.

In providing historical and cultural contexts for the plays, the two editions exemplify an objective common to several in the Bedford series. At the same time, they also differ from Bedford editions such as Susanne Wofford's edition of *Hamlet* and Gerald Graff and James Phelan's edition of *The Tempest*, in which the main objective is to feature a variety of critical approaches. While these other editions would be appropriate for advanced undergraduate courses on literary theory and critical practices, the critical and theoretical knowledge they assume highlights a specific use for the Bedford *Macbeth* and *Dream*. I can see myself including either edition, along with texts from other periods and cultures, in an introductory course in literary interpretation. The inclusion would give beginning English majors some idea of the scope of inquiry and critical perspective that historical knowledge can bring to literary analysis. Students can build on their familiarity with *Macbeth* as a high-school text in developing basic principles of historical scholarship. As for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the editors' self-conscious feminist practice exemplifies the interpretive aims, strategies, and consequences of a major critical approach. Finally, both editions will find their best use in

an advanced undergraduate course on Shakespeare or the early modern period, or in a thematic course that spans multiple periods and/or cultures. The contextual sources will not only aid teachers in the classroom but may spark the interest of graduates and even undergraduates to embark on their own scholarly inquiries.