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Skinner, Quentin. Forensic Shakespeare

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Skinner, Quentin.

Forensic Shakespeare.

Clarendon Lectures in English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 368. ISBN 978-0-1995-5824-7 (hardcover) US\$35.

Forensic Shakespeare, based on his 2011 Clarendon Lectures in English, departs from Quentin Skinner's traditional interest in political discourses; instead, it builds on previous efforts to show the influence of classical (and classicizing) rhetorical precepts on early modern discursive practices. Though Shakespeare's name might draw readers, Skinner's book is primarily a meditation on "the place of the *ars rhetorica* in Renaissance culture" as observed in early modern drama (1). While this book offers further proof of how deeply ancient rhetorical precepts seeped into early modern thought and how they structured modes of expression across genres, Shakespeare's work receives spotty treatment.

While many scholars have studied the rhetorical techniques used by Shakespeare, Skinner argues for a reassessment of investigatory priorities. Of the five elements that make up Ciceronian *ars rhetorica*, scholars who study Shakespeare's rhetoric have focused on *elocutio*, and more specifically that part of *elocutio* that concerns the figures and tropes employed in speech. Skinner believes that such attention is paid at the expense of what ancient and early modern rhetoricians considered the most important element of rhetorical practice, *inventio*, the method of deciphering appropriate arguments for any given circumstance, and concomitantly, *dispositio*, which has to do with the proper arrangement of arguments. Moreover, he points out that though there are various types of rhetorical speech, ancient and early modern rhetoricians emphasized the importance of judicial rhetoric and "forensic eloquence." Skinner argues that key late-Elizabethan and early-Stuart works (*Lucrece*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*) demonstrate Shakespeare's preoccupation with judicial rhetoric, and consequently, key scenes should be read through that lens. The bulk of his book shows how the rhetorical approaches employed by Shakespeare's characters matched the necessities of the particular situations. After two contextualizing chapters on ancient and Renaissance rhetoric, subsequent chapters focus on how various characters fulfill (or sometimes fail to fulfill) the expectations of a classically constructed forensic oration: the *prohoemium*, *narratio*, *confirmatio*, *confutatio*, and *peroratio*.

The structure of important scenes and the language Shakespeare used in them leave little doubt that he often articulated (and sometimes played with) assumptions and practices rooted in ancient rhetorical precepts passed down through the Renaissance. This concerted rhetorical engagement is (in part) proven by the many moments when Shakespeare deviates from his source material to follow the tenets of a classical forensic argumentative approach. Still, Skinner overstretches his argument by claiming that Shakespeare “must frequently have had one or other of the classical or Elizabethan manuals at the front of his mind—possibly in front of him—as he wrote” (3). If we accept the prevalence of classical rhetoric in Renaissance England, the certainty of a direct transmission from rhetorical manual to Shakespearian stage is questionable. Because certain rhetorical approaches were so steeped in Shakespeare’s culture, a forensic approach could have been the result of an osmotic absorption or even of memories not bound by any one text. Moreover, though Skinner is quite right to dismiss critics who might argue that Shakespeare’s construction of forensic arguments is the result of mere common sense or instinct, his insistence on classical rhetorical precepts and their Elizabethan re-articulations as *direct* sources is made at the expense of a broad range of neglected texts. Skinner admits that Shakespeare could have drawn some precepts from legal handbooks, but he dismisses the possibility because “there is no evidence that he had read them” (239). He lauds recent scholarship on the presence of judicial rhetoric in contemporary plays, but he is not interested in pursuing how these discursive contexts could help explain Shakespeare’s rhetorical choices and their significance.

Skinner’s book is most compelling when it shows how a forensic reading of particular scenes changes established interpretations or elucidates interpretive problems. To take an example at random, he helps us understand that the famed handkerchief in *Othello* is not intended to represent definitive proof of Desdemona’s wrong-doing: in line with the rhetorical theory of *confirmatio*, it must be understood as documentary evidence that forms part of a more complex rhetorical exercise devilishly plotted by Iago. But just as Shakespeare’s characters often followed rhetorical rules, they could also break them. In what is perhaps the most tantalizing part of the book, Skinner shows how Shakespeare often trumped expectations by avoiding typical perorations and their constitutive commonplaces, a fact he links to his “antipathy toward

the conclusive” and which might have something to do with nascent critiques of rhetorical practices at the time (311).

Despite a flurry of such insights, Skinner is not interested in exploring what Shakespeare thought, nor is he interested in interpreting the plays in question. In fact, the book avoids interpretation, which he narrowly defines as “the process of analyzing or deconstructing texts and passing judgment on their worth” (2). Instead, he insists that his project is mainly explanatory—he wants to “determine why works [...] possess distinctive characteristics” (2). To this end, Skinner is only partly successful. The “why” Skinner is after cannot be disentangled from an assessment of what any given scene means within the world of the play and the discursive world (outside of the theatre) in which the play found itself embedded. The decisions Shakespeare made ultimately had to do with the conveyance of meaning, and these must have predicated the rhetorical tools used.

Readers will benefit from Skinner’s deep erudition, but not without some frustration. He certainly succeeds in historicizing parts of the Shakespearean canon, showing how certain works are a reflection of, and fit well within, the *ars rhetorica* tradition. In doing so he tells us something important about how some Shakespearean scenes were structured. Nevertheless, it seems as if we are only getting a thin sliver of the story. By avoiding legal discourses (and legal practices) of the times and by ignoring contemporary theatrical tropes, his contextualizing efforts seem truncated. Perhaps most frustratingly, by rejecting traditional modes of literary interpretation, he leaves those of us interested in what Shakespeare was trying to say at a loss. And yet, readers will be thankful for the investigatory path Skinner has helped extend and, just as important, the long road he has left for future research to cover.

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