

## [Review] Newman, H (2019) Impressive Shakespeare: identity, authority and the imprint in Shakespearean drama

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Harry Newman. *Impressive Shakespeare: Identity, Authority and the Imprint in Shakespearean Drama*. Routledge, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4724-6532-0

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What happens to an audience member or reader who leaves a Shakespeare play feeling that they have been changed? Their imaginative scope may have been widened, they may have been emotionally shaken, transported by poetry, or they may have simply laughed a lot. The play has made an impression. The power of drama to *impress* is central, in Harry Newman's view, to the dramatic language of Shakespeare. This language spills out of the plays to infuse Shakespeare's critical heritage, concretising "the idea that his works could enact psychophysiological transformations, both in performance and in print" (34). Newman's proposition is that Shakespeare's plays not only reflect on the ways they create their effects, but have had a shaping role in the way that readers and critics discuss those effects. At the heart of this excellent study are the symbolic uses to which Shakespeare puts three overlapping technologies: printing, coining, and sealing. All of these made impressions on surfaces - paper, metal, and wax - altering the surface in the process. Early modern physiology understood audiences to be similarly *impressed*. In his most ambitious moments, Newman argues that considering the relationships between metaphor and materiality helps us to see what makes a Shakespeare play Shakespearean.

This is a precisely argued book making a suite of interconnected points. Firstly, the symbolism of imprinting technologies informed early modern articulations of the "powerful cognitive, physiological and even spiritual effects of literature and theatre" (3). Secondly, print culture should be understood beyond the narrowly typographic; Newman broadens its scope to include the numismatic and sigillographic imprints that circulated

in early modern England and facilitated social, political, economic, and cultural exchange. This is a very important intervention. Newman makes a point that should be well taken by book historians; his understanding of print culture has the potential to enhance their field of study through the addition of other reproducible material textual forms. When the “language of impression” (4), as Newman calls it, surfaces in Shakespearan drama, it interrogates identity and authority, particularly the authority and impressiveness of the drama itself. As the highly informative first chapter, “Technology, Language, Physiology,” establishes, audiences were believed to be themselves imprinted emotionally and cognitively by the spectacle and language they encountered.

The most significant, and potentially controversial, pole of Newman’s position is that Shakespeare’s language of impression informs not only critical discourse about the playwright, but fundamental critical categories that go beyond early modern drama: character; the transformative power of poetry; counterfeiting and canonical value; Shakespeare’s casting as an immortal literary father. The book ascribes much to the plays themselves and to Shakespeare’s role in the creation of his own critical heritage. Newman’s arguments are persuasive; he demonstrates effectively the continuities between, for example, the imagery of *The Winter’s Tale*, and the prefatory material of the First Folio. In doing so, he rightly steers clear of stating that this is artful on Shakespeare’s behalf, yet he presents a Shakespeare who is very much for all time: “Shakespeare [...] shapes the language by which he is shaped, participating in his own canonisation as an impressive dramatist who imprints minds, hearts and souls around the world and across time” (6). After any number of politically engaged critical theories, some readers may struggle to submit to the implication of a still universal Shakespeare capable of setting the stage for his future reception. Having examined the evidence, though, Newman goes on to carefully consider, in his conclusion, the ethics of the language of impression.

Following chapter one's opening exposition of the relevant technologies, a metatheatrical understanding of the plays informs the rest. " 'The Stamp of Martius': Commoditised Character and the Technology of Theatrical Impression in *Coriolanus*" follows critics such as Emma Smith in viewing the play as fundamentally about the idea of character. Newman weighs up two versions of character: a reproducible commodified imprint, against Shakespearean character as expressive of universal humanity. He finds that *Coriolanus*' reflection on the commodification of personhood plays out through the hero's resistance to his commodity status and his refusal to perform himself. The play makes an impression on the audience in a double process. On one hand it thematises the idea of dramatic character giving access to humanity in all its profundity. On the other, it simultaneously withholds access to that desired depth, presenting dramatic character as an artistic construct within a theatrical economy. This is a nuanced discussion. It would be still more rewarding to see Newman tease out the affinities between his argument and recent readings of the play that unpack the concept of humanity from a posthumanist perspective.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter three, " 'A form in wax / By him imprinted': Sealing and Poetics in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" traces the role of figuration in the play's consideration of poetry. In this highly persuasive discussion, the malleable wax figure (that can be refigured, transfigured) is where ideas of erotic and rhetorical transmission overlap. The *Dream* in particular has shaped reception of Shakespeare's poetics as not only transformative but fertile.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mariele Pfannebecker, "Cyborg *Coriolanus* / Monster Body Politic." *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, Palgrave, 2012, 114-32.

Two recurrent critical problems - Shakespeare's authenticity and the value of his works - are foregrounded in chapter four, " 'Stamps that are forbid': *Measure for Measure*, Counterfeit Coinage, and the Politics of Value." Here Newman's careful historicising (which is admirable throughout) works its full effect. He reads the play's interest in counterfeiting against both Jacobean coinage, and the King's Men's symbolic appropriation of James' authority. Both Shakespearean gold, and debased comedy, the play sits awkwardly between royal and market power.

Turning to *The Winter's Tale*, the last chapter, "The Printer's Tale: Books, Children, and the Prefatory Construction of Shakespearean Authorship," demonstrates Shakespeare's incisive understanding of prefatory rhetoric. The play overlays problems of familial lineage with metaphors of textual reproduction; in this way, Shakespeare appropriates paratextual rhetoric to conceptualise "paternal likeness, legitimacy, immortality and theatricality" (11). *The Winter's Tale* influenced the paratexts of the First Folio, which in turn have shaped ideas about Shakespeare's literary value and cultural longevity.

Newman makes canny use of his conclusion. Eschewing a stale summation, "Canon, Reproduction, Ethics," considers the ethical relationship between Shakespeare the author, his writings, and the critic. As Newman notes, *Impressive Shakespeare* as a whole does not ethically interrogate the language of impression, but it does reveal ways in which that language can be ethically dubious. Revisiting *The Winter's Tale*, for example, the play's use of imprinting metaphors perpetuates the misogynistic qualities of Leontes' paranoia. When critics are immersed in the plays' language, and adopt that language in their analyses, they compromise critical distance and risk reproducing the plays' ethical blindspots.

This is a study that is engagingly written and insightful. Newman draws throughout on a wide range of historical contexts. He links his research to theatre history, book history, material culture studies, and medical humanities; none of these are minor areas and the opening sections of the book would be yet more cogent were the research co-ordinates set out in greater detail. For future scholarship, though, this remarkable work should be a reference point. Not only is it able to broaden our understanding of that fraught term, “print culture,” but it delineates impressively the throughline that connects Shakespeare’s plays, his audiences, and his critical readers.