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Richard Hillman, *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic: French Inflections*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. 248 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £80.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-5261-4407-2.

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The trilogy has become a tetralogy. This book is the fourth of Richard Hillman's scholarly monographs demonstrating what he calls the "Frenchness" of English Renaissance drama, especially that of Shakespeare. The previous three volumes have predominantly focused on tragedy and the tragic;[1] now, at last, it is the turn of comedy and the tragicomic. Hillman's latest book is heavily invested in reconsidering the appropriateness of generic labels assigned to Shakespearean works that mix tragic and comic forms. Such plays themselves discourage rigid formalist classification, as do, moreover, the many French intertexts that inform our understanding of them. Weaving these intertexts into the bigger picture of Shakespeare studies is what Hillman does better than anyone else. *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* takes further still his "roundabout" style of comparative criticism: audacious, densely argued, abounding in insights, and thus highly rewarding in getting us to think obliquely about early modern drama in its discursive interrelatedness.

Readers unfamiliar with Hillman's work should note his idiosyncratic construct of "discursive space." Since *Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Politics of France* (2002), the notion of discursive space has been his primary thinking tool for exploring cross-Channel literary relations. For Hillman, it is never simply one-way traffic, finding French sources that supposedly "influenced" English texts. Instead, he is interested in spaces where various clusters of French and English texts come together, and are set in mutually beneficial dialogue beyond the level of allusion, plot, and setting. The broader the discursive space, the more far-reaching the insights into the cultural imagination of early modern Europe's literati.

In Shakespeare's day, England's literary publics were used to plays that conspicuously combined classical and Italian traditions with local English ones. Observing this *bricolage*, and considering how he will handle it, Hillman insists on the ways in which he has retuned his methodology for *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic*. His previous volume (2012) spoke of "reflections," but that will no longer do. Given the multiplicity of English comedy and the elusive reflections it affords, Hillman judiciously opts to work on "specific instances in which the primary models acknowledged by critical consensus are perceptibly *inflected* by French supplementary or intermediary texts" (p. 3). In order to situate these inflections, Hillman retains a familiar principle: seeking out "signs of the intertext" (p. 33). He is especially interested in those intertexts

that qualify as “ungrammaticalities” (in Michel Riffaterre’s terminology), grabbing our attention because they do not sit comfortably amid the more commonly cited classical/Italian influences on Shakespearean comedy. The result is a wide-ranging study that proposes specific and often unfamiliar points of intersection between Shakespearean plays and a number of “ungrammatical” French intertexts that both complement and nuance our understanding of Shakespeare’s Italian and classical models. By enlarging this discursive space, Hillman is able to reveal a broad tendency whereby Shakespeare used French material, dramatic and nondramatic, to inflect comic forms in potentially tragic directions. This is an arresting discovery, and one that can be seen from early Shakespearean comedies to later tragicomedies (or “romances”).

Structurally, *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* is rather uneven—curiously appropriate given its subject matter. It opens with a brief introductory chapter housing a case study of *The Taming of the Shrew* that succinctly outlines the method and the approach. This is followed by an extensive meditation on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that comprises the second chapter. While the third chapter (on *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *As You Like It*) is short, the fourth and fifth chapters are substantially longer. Hillman makes an intriguing analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Twelfth Night* in chapter four; and he offers a compelling reading of *Pericles* and of *The Winter’s Tale* in chapter five. Thus, while following a meandering course, the book eventually tackles the problematic concept of “tragicomic romance” in the Shakespearean canon head-on in its final chapter. What is continually impressive throughout the book is the way in which Hillman deftly decenters and then repositions his Shakespearean material at the center of the discursive space. This allows him to develop a continuous, innovative approach to Shakespeare: one that avoids the vice of obscurantism and at the same time gives due diligence to the French intertexts that inflect the dramatist’s output within a European context.

Chapter two (“Dreaming in French”) throws up a number of important points about the pastoral plot device known as the *chaîne amoureuse*. After briefly considering points of contact with putative continental models (*Diana* of Jorge de Montemayor), Hillman leads us to the specificity of his unusual French intertexts. He begins with Nicholas de Montreux’s *Bergeries de Juliette*, which included a Montemayor-inspired *La Diane* that was probably in print circulation by the time Shakespeare composed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595-1596). Hillman has previously demonstrated the significance of Montreux’s substantial output in France during the final decade of the sixteenth century.[2] In *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic*, he goes further, showing the originality of reading Montreux alongside Shakespeare: witness the “comic reverse-twisting of the *chaîne amoureuse* through Diane’s disbelief” that “closely recalls [Shakespeare’s] Helena from several convergent angles” (p. 32). More familiar than Montreux to many modern readers will be his French contemporary, Marie de Gournay, the indefatigable woman of letters and forerunner of modern feminism, whose *Proumenoir* constitutes the main French intertext for the second half of chapter two. Modern scholarship has shown interest in Gournay’s text as a prototype of the novel, even a precursor of *écriture féminine*. Picking up on the image of interweaving that Patricia Cholakian identified in her edition of the *Proumenoir*, Hillman weaves Gournay into his understanding of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Gournay’s *histoire tragique* tells of a couple, Alinda and Léontin, who, like Shakespeare’s Pyramus and Thisbe, become martyrs to love itself. Hillman argues that in Gournay’s *Proumenoir*, both sexes are ensnared by idealizing passion—a view that is parodically echoed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which then draws us back to a complication in Gournay’s feminism. Women are not just hapless victims of men; just like men, women require the intellectual resources to resist their baser passions, lest tragedy ensue. From two very different French intertexts—Gournay and Montreux—Hillman moves to

interrogate the parodic potential of the *chaîne amoureuse* in Shakespeare's famous comedy, culminating in its lion mishaps: these, too, Hillman convincingly shows, have French precedents in the *Ovide moralisé* and *moralité* traditions, and in the version of the Ovidian Pyramus and Thisbe legend by the Pléiade poet Jean-Antoine de Baïf.

To those who know Hillman's work, chapter three will feel familiar, arguing for politically-charged "French associations," namely the winding down of the Wars of Religion, of which there are demonstrable echoes in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Less convincing are the French associations with *As You Like It*, which Hillman links back to Gournay's *Proumenoir*, and (more convincingly) to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, regarding Shakespeare's "translation of love into something far more complex" (p. 93)—something more tragicomic. This latter point is developed with great subtlety in chapter four, which will particularly appeal to specialists of French Renaissance theater. Traditional scholarship has long held that tragicomedy as a genre appeared in France in 1582 with Robert Garnier's *Bradamante* (an adaptation of Ariosto). However, as Hillman and others have shown, this is not the case: "plays claiming to mix tragedy and comedy in France can be traced back to around the mid-sixteenth century and present an affinity with the mysteries and moralities, including religious content" (p. 151). Here, Hillman brings into play the little-known *Tragique comedie Françoise de l'homme justifié par Foy* (1554), the work of a Protestant Pastor, Henri de Barran, who had connections to the court of Navarre. Hillman proposes Barran's play not as a putative "source" of Shakespeare's tragicomic pattern, but as an aid to tracing "conscientious inward suffering" and "a miraculous discovery of spiritual peace" from a distinctly Protestant viewpoint that resonates with three comedies: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Twelfth Night*. As such, Hillman fleshes out the "Frenchness" of multiple *concupiscences*—money, sex, power, and their pharisaic abuses—that manifest themselves across these three Shakespearean plays. To Barran's *Tragique comedie* he adds a further cluster of French intertexts surrounding an historical figure in France: the disgraced Pierre Victor Palma Cayet, whose conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism at the turn of the seventeenth century prompted various satirical backlashes from the Protestant camp. These texts add apposite historical breadth to our understanding of the way Shakespeare parodies the revenge paradigm through Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

The Malvolio business, to an extent, anticipates the shifting of gears effectuated by chapter five. Here, Hillman announces what has become his book's overarching narrative: a shift from "comic patterns pulled in tragic directions by their Shakespearean treatment ... by way of French intertexts" towards "patterns intrinsically mingling the tragic and the comic and conditioned by pan-European romance traditions" (p. 146). By now it is becoming increasingly clear that Shakespeare is but one of a number of key players to bring about such patterning. Others include Matteo Bandello and his French translator-adaptor, François de Belleforest, whose vastly popular *Histoires tragiques* are thought to have inflected various Shakespearean plays, as Hillman carefully discusses. Belleforest's "uneasy blend of moralism and eroticism" (p. 163) makes for engaging reading in its own right, though Hillman brings it to bear usefully upon Shakespeare's tragicomic style in *Pericles*. This leads Hillman to make one of his boldest claims: Belleforest popularized not only a vital part of the Hellenistic romance dynamic; his approach "helped to define the generic terms and presentational style, not just of *Pericles* but of Shakespeare's final works at large" (p. 174). Yet this is not the final word. The last part of chapter five moves away from Belleforest to consider the impact of a French interlocutor who will be familiar to most: Montaigne. Focusing on the climactic reunion scene of *The Winter's Tale*, Hillman excavates several Montaignian intertexts. Most notable is "De trois bonnes femmes" (*Essais* II.35), which

presented Shakespeare with a female figure named Paulina, who could “mediate between tragic loss and miraculous recovery” (p. 187). Brought back from the brink of suicide, Paulina is known to Montaignian scholars as a female exemplar of Stoic virtue [3]; yet Hillman suggests different “Pauline” associations with redemption in *The Winter’s Tale*. In a neat tie-in with his previous chapter, he takes us back to the Apostle Paul, whose doctrine of justification by faith suffuses Barran’s *Tragique comedie* more noticeably than Montaigne’s *Essais*. For Hillman, such resonances suggest that Shakespeare’s complex gestures towards Montaigne in *The Winter’s Tale* “exploit an openness exposed by the essayist’s very renunciation of certitude and accommodation of ambiguity” (p. 188).

In sum, Hillman’s *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* is a masterly study of intertextuality. It will become an important model for comparative literature specialists owing to its astute demonstration of evolving French and English theatrical forms and tastes. We are given a rich tapestry of ideas about narrative and dramatic romance circulating between France and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Given the density of the argument deployed, the book should be savored over several sittings. Occasionally, Hillman’s writing becomes so intricate as to lose the reader—but the liveliness of his style always recaptures our attention. Hillman has a singular gift for reading, viewing, and interpreting dramatic works in the period 1550-1640; *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* demonstrates, once again, and with renewed energy, how “Frenchness tends to lead at once away from, and back towards, Englishness” (p. 83).

## NOTES

[1] *French Reflections in the Shakespearean Tragic: Three Case Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); *French Origins of English Tragedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); *Shakespeare, Marlowe and the Politics of France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

[2] Besides an earlier article on which this chapter is based, see *French Reflections in the Shakespearean Tragic*, chapter three.

[3] For a compelling reading of Paulina’s botched self-killing as an act of virtue, see Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, and Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 263-265.

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