

Andrea Peghinelli, *Shakespeare in burlesque. Il culto del Bardo e le parodie dei teatri illegittimi di Londra 1769-1843*. Spoleto (PG): Editoria & Spettacolo, 2012. Pp. 208. €16. ISBN 9788897276289.

Many scholars now recognise the centrality of drama to British culture and society during the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries – a subject that had long suffered from critical distortion and relative scholarly neglect. Georgian theatre and drama no longer play a secondary role in the study of Romanticism, thanks to the recent publication of studies dedicated to all kind of performances: spoken or sung, recited or danced, staged in major and minor theatres, legitimate or illegitimate. One of the most significant contributors to the subject was without question Jane Moody, who, in *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (2000), provides an illuminating perspective on this vast cultural field. Moody presents a textual, legal, social, and dramatic basis for Romantic theatre and its dramaturgy, with much original focus on the major issues and personalities of the time. In revealing the complexity of historical live performance, Moody's scholarship helped reconstruct the deep connection between theatre and the controversies of eighteenth-century social and political life; the relationship between audiences, performers and critical reception, which all made British theatre an important site for political, social and cultural debate. Stimulated by Moody's innovative and challenging work, Andrea Peghinelli's *Shakespeare in burlesque* aims to illustrate to an Italian audience the transformations that took place on the Romantic stage, and moreover to carry out an exploration of illegitimate theatre, investigating in particular the adaptations of some of Shakespeare's works into new theatrical forms such as that of the burlesque (intended as a popular kind of theatre).

In the opening chapters, Peghinelli meticulously illustrates the dense panorama of the theatre in its legal and social contexts, underscoring several aspects of the phenomenon of illegitimate theatre: when it was popular, who were its promoters, locations, representations, aims and audience. These illicit places for entertainment had to cope with the monopoly of the two patent theatres, together with strict censorship exerted by the Lord Chamberlain, who prohibited any kind of unauthorised performance. These illegitimate theatres, such as the Surrey Theatre, together with the patent theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, shaped the demands of a growing and discerning public. Theatregoers were mostly attracted by the rapidly improving method of staging comedies and tragedies (through scriptwriting, stage effects, music, lighting, scenography and, most of all, acting).

Peghinelli shows how illegitimate theatres particularly welcomed secondary forms of entertainment, since they only could perform spectacles, melodrama, ballets, pantomimes, hippo-dramas, *burletta* and burlesques. Alongside the spoken dramas of the patent playhouses, this flourishing of different theatrical genres reflected the heterogeneity of the audience, who gathered together in the theatres despite significant differences in education, manners, and social class. After this long and comprehensive presentation of the theatrical arena in the Romantic period, the author focuses on key studies of some lesser known Shakespearean burlesques, such as *Hamlet Travestie* by John Poole (1810), and adaptations of *Macbeth* from 1809 to 1842; subtitled as 'A Ballet of Music and Action', 'Travestie' or 'Modernised, A Most Illegitimate Drama'. This allows Peghinelli to highlight the ongoing changes to burlesque as a new kind of theatrical genre that was to gain much success, especially in the Victorian period.

The production of William Shakespeare's plays in the minor theatres outside Westminster required the invention of a new form. The English bard was not only transformed through alternative performances, but also charged with new social and political messages. These new, irreverent and satirical forms of Shakespeare were intended to dismantle the traditional and conservative representation of spoken drama, and to shape a

new collective imaginary. Despite the bad reputation that illegitimate theatres enjoyed – they were considered places of sin and corruption, both physically due to the presence of prostitutes, and intellectually, for they staged popular shows – they gained a lot of critical attention. This is well reported by Peghinelli, who documents his lively enquiry into the reception of illegitimate theatre by scrutinizing articles, reviews and especially playbills of the time, largely the result of archival research. Both Peghinelli's case studies, dedicated to burlesque and other adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, are analysed in their public or private representations, discussing the roles of different actors and managers involved in the production. Moreover contemporary reception – whether positive or negative – is well illustrated. Peghinelli achieves his ambitious aim to follow the innovative footsteps of Jane Moody – to whose memory *Shakespeare in burlesque* is dedicated – in order to bring to life the illegitimate theatre in all its contrasts of light and shade, stressing its importance within the larger panorama of Romantic theatre.

Serena Baiesi
University of Bologna