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# Shakespeare's Dead / Simon Palfrey and Emma Smith

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**Simon Palfrey and Emma Smith. *Shakespeare's Dead*. Oxford, UK: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 2016. 192 pp. + 80 illustrations.**

Reviewed by CATHERINE E. THOMAS

Palfrey and Smith's *Shakespeare's Dead* is a delightful meditation on how death thematically, historically, and psychologically pervades Shakespeare's poetry and drama. Crafted as an accompaniment to the Bodleian Library's 2016 exhibition by the same name, this richly illustrated book commemorates the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death. It does not possess the trappings of a traditional academic argument, nor should we expect it to. Rather, Palfrey and Smith provide us with nine short chapters' worth of lively close readings and situate them in the religious, political, and philosophical debates of early modern England. Their work reminds us of the pleasures of reading Shakespeare and the intricate style with which he engaged the ideas of his time.

For example, the first chapter tackles one of Shakespeare's most famous death-ridden passages, Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech. The authors employ the speech as a platform to discuss the impact of Protestant Reformation ideas on death. In particular, they illuminate people's anxieties surrounding their spiritual status, which often was debated amidst competing denominational factions. The representation of this anxiety around death and salvation, they note, is not limited to tragedies, but is found throughout the oeuvre. With the shift towards official Protestant forms of worship, some opportunities for connecting with and comforting the dead provided by Catholic beliefs such as Purgatory evaporated; as Palfrey and Smith pithily remark, "The dead were on their own" (16). The chapter concludes with the observation that Shakespeare's plays contain multiple perspectives on spirituality, that it is hard to nail down his personal stance on the subject, as desirable as that might be. It is this quality that makes for great food for thought as we encounter his work repeatedly.

In similar style, Chapter 4 takes on the plague, which seems everywhere and nowhere at once in Shakespeare's plays. As Palfrey and Smith explain, his drama abounds with references to plague-induced suffering and death; and yet, nobody actually dies of it. It is always on the periphery, lurking. Their engagement with the subject and its manifestation in his works is commendable. In the brief span of nine pages of text, they take us through the tropes of love as disease, *carpe diem*, and *danse macabre*. They give voice to *Venus and Adonis* as both a product of plague times (with the periodic closure of the theaters) and as a vehicle for expressing the erotics of death. We even take a brief jaunt with Thomas Dekker's pamphlet, *A Wonderful Year*, putting its journalistic realism about a city grappling with mass illness up against Shakespeare's renditions of frustrated love and poetic bodily demise.

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Here, and elsewhere in the volume, remarks are lightly notated and focused on sampling passages for reflection. The text emphasizes Shakespeare's connectedness to the questions and ideals of his culture rather than rigorously examining critical conversations about the somewhat morbid subject matter. This is not so much a critique as an observation about how the style of *Shakespeare's Dead* addresses its audience and purpose. The authors also sprinkle in references to well-known early modern scholars of Shakespeare such as Stephen Greenblatt, Robert Watson, and Michael Neill, lending additional credibility and insights for the more academically discerning reader.

One of the other charms of the book is its plethora of beautiful, full-color images, most of which depict books, prints, or other art objects from the Bodleian's collections. For instance, Chapter 5's discussion of the confluence of death and sex imagery in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* is juxtaposed with three nineteenth-century prints illustrating the deaths of the lovers and Desdemona, respectively. While the artistic pieces framing the close readings are not often addressed directly, they provide a provocative and attractive counterpoint for the ideas and allow the reader to mull over their design and intent. Whether the images are serving as a souvenir of the exhibition or as a substitute for attendance, they certainly add to the sense that Shakespeare was in conversation with other writers and artists from his time and that later artisans recognized the value of his works. They are at once time capsules of the early modern period and inspirational tomes for repeated engagement, reflection, and adaptation.

I have but few quibbles with *Shakespeare's Dead*, and they are along the lines of wishing for more tasty morsels than finding marked lack. The authors' claim in Chapter 2 that *Measure for Measure* "is the most engaged with the art of dying, and . . . has the most sustained imaginings of being dead" strikes me as quite arguable, given the number of other plays that take on the subject in such graphic detail and with such poetic vigor—*Hamlet* and *Lear*, to name only two (23). Still, I appreciated the extended attention and promotion they gave *Measure*, since it tends to be a lesser-read and lesser-performed play. Its reflection on spiritual and moral struggles, paired with political power jockeying and rhetorically masterful speeches, make it incredibly fertile ground for analysis and emotionally mercurial. Organizationally, this play choice also made sense; the chapter sits between the first on *Hamlet* and other tragedies and the third on death in comedies. The latter chapter (three) followed the letter of the law and only explored plays firmly classified as comedies. I wished it had taken up the death-related comedy, however dark, found in other genres: the Clown's gallows humor in *Titus Andronicus*, the Fool's musings in *Lear*, Falstaff's pragmatic prattle in the *Henry* plays. These, too, provide a complex sense of death's omnipresence in the everyday lives of kings and paupers and Shakespeare's deliberate engagement of the psychosocial effects of facing mortality.

Palfrey and Smith have delivered an enjoyable and thoroughly readable survey of the presence of death, the dead, and the deadliness in Shakespeare's body of work—across genres, amid significant cultural upheavals, and despite the very pragmatic realities of being a writer and player in an early modern theater company. The book does not try to be what it isn't, and I salute it for that honesty.

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It offers its audience thoughtful readings, beautiful images, some surprising observations, and prose that moves with energy and wit. While scholars of Shakespeare may learn little new, they can relish the artistic journey the authors take us on. And for those who don't study Shakespeare for a living, but who appreciate art and intellectual exploration, this book makes a great acquisition. *Shakespeare's Dead* provides a *memento mori* that will beget pleasure rather than dread.

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