

Bruce R. Smith. *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Blackwell Manifestos). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Hardcover: ISBN-13: 978-0631235484; 232 pp. US\$84.95. Paperback: ISBN-10: 0631235485; US\$29.95. Kindle: US\$26.96.

Reviewed by James Mainard O'Connell, Assistant Technical Director/Shop Foreman, Columbia University

*Phenomenal Shakespeare* proclaims itself a manifesto on the study of Shakespeare from the perspective of historical phenomenology, i.e., the study of historic knowledge through the phenomena we can observe with our five senses in the present. Despite some flaws, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* successfully demonstrates that historical phenomenology is a legitimate lens through which Shakespeare can be studied. The work is divided into four chapters, a Prologue, and an Epilogue. The first chapter, a “how-to-do-it chapter” (xvi), is followed by three chapters that each seek to examine a different facet of Shakespeare, using phenomenology as the lens for study. As such, the book is as much a handbook as it is a manifesto.

The author, Bruce R. Smith, uses the Prologue to serve three principal functions. The first is to clarify the differing ways in which he will refer to Shakespeare throughout the book—WSA (William Shakespeare as Author), THWS (The Historical William Shakespeare), CWWS (Collected Works of William Shakespeare), and WSCI (William Shakespeare as Cultural Icon). This division of four divergent ways of discussing “Shakespeare” is a useful consideration in general, but it does not emerge as a major element in the book

and is thus sometimes distracting. The second function of the Prologue is to begin defining historical phenomenology, but a clear, succinct definition of such does not emerge until the Epilogue. Rather, Smith discusses the etymology of “phenomena” as it relates to the writings of Francis Bacon. Finally, the Prologue addresses the purpose of the book, to provide “evidence that subjective experience of poems and plays written 400 years ago can be approached from the outside in culturally specific and politically aware terms” (xvi).

The first chapter, “As It Likes You,” initially discusses the word “like” in the context of the title “As You Like It” and maintains that “like” means more than simply “to find agreeable or congenial,” but also “as” or “seems ready to”, among other meanings (8-9). Smith proceeds to argue that “it likes me” is an older form in which the object is acting upon the observer; he then examines the philosophies of Descartes, Bacon, and Husserl in relation to “it likes me.” He writes that compared to Descartes and Bacon Husserl’s philosophy “is very close to ‘As it likes me’” (22). Finally, Smith challenges the new historicism’s insistence on the “differentness of the early modern past” (23) by contending that the past and future are merely points on a continuum that always converge in the present and that many of the materials of Early Modern England are available for us to experience in the present; and that by experiencing them, we share an intersubjectivity with Shakespeare. This chapter, as the one that follows, is not always clear in its direction but successfully lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book.

The second chapter, “How Should One Read a Shakespeare Sonnet?” covers much territory and a variety of subjects, using sonnet 29 as the central

focus of study. Among the subjects covered are writing out the sonnet as a means to share intersubjectivity with Renaissance readers, thought versus speech and which comes first, the importance of pronouns and the way they situate the reader and the author, and the value of considering “one” as the subject as opposed to “I” or “thee.” In this chapter, Smith is not always clear about why he is leading the reader through these subjects or how these subjects specifically relate to historical phenomenology. As a result, the chapter feels more like jazz improvisation than a clearly reasoned argument, but the various subjects are each so well considered that the journey is well worth the lack of a clear destination.

“Carnal Knowledge,” the third chapter, uses *Venus and Adonis* as a means for exploring the relations of characters to the world-at-hand and readers to the world-at-hand, specifically in the realm of sexuality. It feels more organized than the previous chapters, as Smith defines its order near the beginning: “It will start with the printed book itself and move out by degrees into the ambient world.” First, Smith explores the physical properties of the original printings of *Venus and Adonis* and how those properties might affect the reader of the poem. He then proceeds to the visual representations of Venus and Adonis that might have been in the minds of the narrative’s original readers and eventually to topics of sexuality such as the bedchamber’s location, the etymology of “penetration,” and the Renaissance sexual imagination. This chapter is insightful throughout, but not every idea is fully defined, and many of the insights could exist separately from a discussion of historical phenomenology.

The fourth chapter, “Touching Moments,” is the most successful, as it is the most focused and remains trained on the tangible. Using *King Lear* as a touchstone, Smith discusses the sense of touch as it relates to a reader of Shakespeare and to the audience of Shakespeare’s plays. After a discussion of Braille and the physical indentations on paper created by the Renaissance printing process, Smith establishes, by citing a 2007 virtual reality study that demonstrated a physiological response to viewing another person’s suffering, a physical connection between audience and performer/character despite the distance audience members sit from the stage. By the end of this chapter, he demonstrates the validity of historical phenomenology in the study of CWWS (Collected Works, see above) both for scholars and for performers.

Throughout *Phenomenal Shakespeare*, Smith maintains a striking balance between authoritative and good-humored tones, making his book palatable to a relatively wide academic readership. He does, however, seem to assume his readers come to the book with a basic knowledge of phenomenology, since he does not succinctly define it until the Epilogue (“you cannot know anything apart from the way in which you come to know it.” [185]). Theatre professionals will not find *Phenomenal Shakespeare* as useful as scholars will, with the possible exception of “Touching Moments”; and some readers may be turned off by Smith’s Eurocentric choice of philosophers worth discussing. Despite these concerns, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* is an insightful demonstration of how one might employ historical phenomenology in the study of Shakespeare.