SBReviews_10:

William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*. Barnes & Noble Shakespeare. Edited by Julie Crawford. Series editor: David Scott Kastan. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008. ISBN 978- 1-4114-0085-6. US$6.95

Reviewed by Jeremy Fiebig, Assistant Professor of Theatre, Fayetteville State University

The Barnes & Noble Shakespeare series emerged in recent years both because of its eye-level placement in the "Shakespeare" section of Barnes & Noble (Shakespeare, as it happens, is the only such writer to receive his own section heading in the chain store) and because of the noteworthy editors that have undertaken the series. The series runs counter to recent trends, such as in the Arden, New Cambridge, and Oxford editions that approach variorum status and that favor volume of annotation and gloss. The reader of the Barnes & Noble series is probably not the close reader of the English Department, or the dramaturge (and therefore the director and actor) of the Theatre Department. For these reasons alone, the series may be cast aside, neither the subject of the great editorial detail demanded by current trends, nor the subject of serious consideration by the two or three principle markets of specialty readership. On one hand, the series seems to have opted for becoming less useful to the specialty reader by becoming "more accessible" to the general one. On the other hand, a simple, relatively unadorned volume does have its uses, perhaps especially for the theatre reader and practitioner, and especially in light of both busy editorial trend and the onslaught of information streaming across computer screens, through speakers, and via 24-hour cable programming.

On the company's website, Amanda Reed, a bookseller with Barnes & Noble, touts the Barnes & Noble Shakespeare series as one that makes "Shakespeare more accessible than ever before."[1] "Designed with students and the general reader in mind," these editions cursorily examine the plays, and are unencumbered by "odd" markings in the text or

academic jargon in the footnotes. Reed's assertion, quite aside from feeling like publisher fluff, prompts several questions: What does "accessible" mean? To whom is this volume "accessible?" Who exactly is the "general reader?" For Barnes & Noble, I fear the answer to the latter question is "whoever will buy this book." These questions are worth considering and inevitably lead me to ask a final one: in the age of the Internet, crowd-sourcing, EBSCOhost, SparkNotes, and public domain versions of Shakespeare, some with hyperlinked glossaries and lengthy annotations, what need is there for an accessible paper volume, particularly when it is the presence of the printed page that seems to define what is inaccessible in this new millennium? I'll come back to this question in a moment, because while I think the volume is problematic with regard to its stated goal, I do think it suits a particular need, both as a symbol and as a tool, in today's market.

The series is not particularly concerned with nuance or depth of meaning and appears to distrust the reader's ability or willingness to handle too much information at once. Introductory and supporting matter is brief, and the notes are almost too concise. While this edition, edited by Julie Crawford, does not impose itself on the reader, yet it does present an admirable and useful overview of the play's central issues, its lives and afterlives in performance and art, textual and editorial matters, Shakespeare the man, and Shakespeare's England. For good or ill, this volume is worth some consideration for what it does (and does not) bring to the reader's attention and for the uses it has (and has not) with regard to the student and general reader, its intended audiences.

The volume is comfortably arranged with the broadly-spaced play text on the right-hand page with notes facing on the left. These notes consist mostly of paraphrases of Shakespeare's trickier lines, several of which, at least in Crawford's *Merchant*, emphasize the playwright's wordplay ("gentle" as pun for "Gentile," 124-125) or period references and

proverbs ("fast bind, fast find"). With an ample glossary, the text of the play itself is relatively unadorned, the editorial markings simple, and the resulting flow of dialogue much easier to engage than typical scholarly editions. Crawford's notes are quite concise, but on occasion oddly indulgent. For example, her note on Shylock's "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter? Fled with a Christian!" discusses other scholarly views and possible relationships to source material in Masaccio's *Il novellino* and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. This detail, so particular, almost seems to work against the edition's stated goal of "accessibility." One can only assume that this and similar indulgences in the edition emerge from the introductory and contextual essays aim to be "short and sweet" for the lay reader.

The play is sandwiched between several (very) brief essays by Crawford and Kastan, as well as chronologies of Shakespeare's life, notable performances of the play, and a reading list. Of the essays, Crawford's introduction to the play is most clearly constructed for the lay reader, outlining several of the "top tier" issues of the play (anti-Semitism, usury, male companionship, judgment). In her later essay, Crawford expertly discusses the possibilities of staging the play in Shakespeare's theatre, including welcome discussions of costume, makeup, and architecture each of which is drawn from references in the play ("gabardine," "complexion," and the presence of a balcony, etc.), and outlines the possibilities of the original performance. Later still, the edition outlines both significant performances of the play and derivative works in theatre, literature, and art. The number and variety of these brief contextual materials offer many routes into the play for readers coming to Shakespeare or *Merchant* for the first time.

The approach to such breadth of contexts, of lives and afterlives of this play, is, well, noble (pardon my pun), but neglects many of the play's most problematic, and significant, elements. For example, Crawford describes Antonio as a person whose "status as moral

arbiter is somewhat questionable." (4). This kind of understatement is typical of these editions for the general reader. Left unmentioned are the notions that Portia represents a powerful female protagonist who anticipates Beatrice, Rosalind, Viola, Helena, among others, that Antonio is a far-less-than-sympathetic victim of Shylock's prosecution, that the casket device presents challenges to the feminist reader, that Portia's comments about the Prince of Morocco are, at best, racially problematic, and that Bassano's and Gratiano's encounter with the young doctor of law is unsettling. Taken together, these ambiguities in Shakespeare's play form the basis of a world in which gray area is measured against gray area, where expectation is circumvented at every turn, where anti-Semite is pitted against anti-Christian, where one main love interest expresses troubling racial judgments while the other quickly yields the symbol of his marital fidelity to a young man, where nearly everyone is too quick to judge fairly. Though scholarly analysis of these issues is perhaps not "accessible" to the lay reader (an idea worth no small measure of quibbling), it is, nevertheless, important that the reader be exposed to the questions scholarship would ask. So while these editions, and in particular this edition of *Merchant*, provide a worthy collection of contexts in history, performance, bibliography, and biography, and a clear, concisely annotated text, which leads the reader into the play, little of the edition leads the reader out of the play. Thus, the play is not seen as a living thing, not the subject of new or "hot" issues in criticism, not the subject of ongoing conversation, but an artifact that can be tossed aside as cheaply as a magazine, or a Reader's Digest version of some other book by some other person. The annotated reading list is one possible exception. Nonetheless, the reader is left wondering: what makes this play, or this writer, great? Or, more simply, what's the big deal? Why the fuss over *Merchant*? Or Shakespeare?

At least with regard to the assumption that the intended audience for this edition is someone who will pick up this edition from the rack next adjacent to the graphic novels and self-help books at a Barnes & Noble store, these are the essential questions to address – not because the play cannot speak for itself, but because these editions seem not to trust the reader's ability to listen to the play's speaking. While the series does provide one of the most readable editions of Shakespeare in terms of format and approach, it leaves even the casual reader somewhat wanting. If the reader is not to be trusted to wade through the muddy waters of a cluttered scholarly volume, it does not follow that that reader cannot be trusted to swim unassisted once the reading is done. The edition, not the play, must point not simply to the play's plot, characters, and contexts, but also to the myriad responses the play compels us toward. Surely, this is part of, if not the fundamental basis for, accessibility.

At the same time, the edition's simple, straightforward nature does make for a useful (if accidentally so) volume, particularly for the theatre reader and practitioner. To return to the question from earlier: "what need is there for an accessible paper volume?" The theatre person in me answers this question in a particular way – and it is probably a talking point I picked up somewhere among the actors and directors of Shakespeare I've met along the way, if not my performance-leaning graduate professors – namely, that an accessible Shakespeare is a performative one. Access came (or comes) not from the page, but from the connection between the performed and the received word. The theatre person in me also knows that very few glosses for meaning and even fewer annotations can be performed. Knowing what words mean is absolutely essential, but picking up on historical or obscure cultural references is of far less use to the actor or the director, who can no more easily perform "my wealthy Andrew docked in sand" after knowing that "Andrew," or possibly "San Andres," is a shipped that was docked in Cadiz in 1596, or that "docked" is Rowe's emendation of

"docks" (Q1-2), but could also just as easily be the more obscure "decks" offered by Delius, or that all of this is a foreshadowing of Salarino's (or is it Salario's?) description of disaster at sea later in 3.1 (all notes offered admirably, I should add, in the New Cambridge edition of *Merchant*, edited by M. M. Mahood). The Barnes & Noble edition detaches from this level of detail, letting the text stand up on its own much more often than current scholarly editions, and getting out of the way of the play much more often, too. For this reason, the edition and the series represent a useful tool for the actor, standing alone with only an audience's disposition, to present the text, and, I think, a needed symbol in today's marketplace, one that runs against a constant demand for more information.

[1] Reed, Amanda. "A Fresh Approach to Shakespeare" Barnes & Noble - Books, Textbooks, EBooks, Toys, Games & More. Barnes & Noble. Webcast. 06 Aug. 2010. <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/flash/bookswelove.asp?PID=15120&popupclose=0 >.