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Review by George Klawitter

Benson, Sean. *Shakespearean Resurrection*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009. 219 pages.

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The thesis of *Shakespearean Resurrection* is stated clearly in the introduction: Shakespeare “repeatedly evokes Christ’s resurrection from the dead when long-lost characters reunite” (1). Benson must first, of course, handle the critics (he calls them “materialists”) who claim Shakespeare’s purpose was anything but religious because Shakespeare early on questioned his own faith and never used his plays for proselytizing. So Benson attacks Stephen Greenblatt and, with the retrospective help of Richard Strier, eviscerates non-believers who project their own understanding of Shakespeare-the-man into the plays. Benson, a believer I presume, runs the risk of erring in the opposite direction, but he deftly covers his tracks by asserting that Shakespeare’s use of resurrection imagery is aesthetic, not religious.

By noting that comedy moves from sadness to happiness, Benson sets Shakespeare up nicely to fit a pattern in which characters transform along Christian lines, even in a play so basically pagan as *The Comedy of Errors*. In this play resurrection is essentially symbolic and best expressed in recognition scenes where real people “resurrect” from disguise or separation, but Benson is on more stable ground when he works with the “resurrection” of Hero in *Much Ado* and a supposedly drowned sister-brother in *Twelfth Night*. These plots actually evoke death. Of course, other critics have noted the power of “resurrection” scenes in Shakespeare (Garber, Barton, Lomax), but Benson moves beyond them to assert that Shakespeare uses actual allusions to Christ’s own resurrection. This is new ground, but Benson is careful to note that Shakespeare’s “Christianity is aesthetic, his figurations of resurrection intuitive and suggestive rather than overt” (67).

Benson’s consideration of two “failed” resurrections begins with an extended comparison of *Romeo and Juliet* to its source, Arthur Brooke’s 1562 *Romeus and Juliet*, and demonstrates that

Shakespeare was far more interested in evoking resurrection than Brooke ever was. A “failed” resurrection is important in that it simply evokes belief in an afterlife whereas actual resurrection (and reunion) will occur on Doomsday. In *Othello* Benson finds room for “failure” in Desdemona’s momentary resurrection before she dies finally in Emilia’s arms, a gesture that Benson finds more significant than the quasi-resurrections of the comedies. Desdemona is for Othello “a resurrected soul in communion with the triune God” (97), but Benson is on shaky theological grounds here as he suggests the soul dies in order to be resurrected (97). In Christian thinking the soul never dies (except metaphorically through sin): only the body dies to be later resurrected and rejoined to its soul on Judgment Day. It is a minor slip for Benson in an otherwise solid argument.

Benson’s reading of *King Lear* is complicated. He has an obvious bone to pick with nihilists who, he asserts, presently hold sway over critical reception of the play. Benson labors to reconcile pagan with Christian elements in *Lear*, showing how Shakespeare preferred an earlier pagan source over a “contemporary, biblicized *Leir*” (104). Benson’s attack on both Jonathan Dollimore and Stephen Greenblatt is informed and credible. For me, Benson’s work on *Lear*, its sources and its critics, is the most engaging chapter in his book.

Benson divides his consideration of the romances into two chapters: one for *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, the other for *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. In the former, he examines Shakespeare’s delicate blend of paganism with Christianity, demonstrating that Shakespeare, writing to touch the hearts of a Christian audience bred on Christian philosophy, had to use Christian anachronisms here and there, a usage that did not bother Northrop Frye, who recognized the necessity of blending past and present to link disparate communities (127). *The Winter’s Tale* naturally affords Benson one of his best resurrection examples in Hermione, and *The Tempest* gives Benson numerous examples of resurrected characters. Forgiveness, Benson concludes, is that action by which characters are allowed to be resurrected into new lives, a fitting conclusion to his excellent analysis of the romances.

As another reader (Raymond Frontain) has pointed out, Benson’s book, by way of an appendix (“Mock Resurrections”), hints at parodic resurrection sources in Shakespeare but neglects

to flesh out what could have been a very strong chapter in the book. In fairness to Benson, however, it must be said that he at least recognizes the presence of such parodic scenes, and he may very well be thinking of doing further work in this area. The sketchy appendix (three pages) begs expansion.

Overall, *Shakespearean Resurrection* is a rewarding read. Benson knows Shakespeare's source material, and he argues his cases convincingly. There is a blessed absence of "theory" in this book, and Benson's prose is smooth, intelligent, and eminently readable. He never loses focus throughout the book.

*George Klawitter*