Literary Linguistics
International Journal

Volume 13, No. 1, May 2025

Review: Susanne Riecker, Reflections on Fictionality: The Poetics of Henry V. Paderborn, Brill/Schöningh, 2023. ISBN: 978-3-506-79565-6, 89.00 €.

Keywords:
Poetics, fictionality and possibility, mocking and making, Shakespeare, *Henry V*, review

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Reflections on Fictionality reads William Shakespeare's *Henry V* (c. 1599) through the following line, spoken by the Chorus:

> Yet sit and see,
> *Minding true things by what their mockeries be.*
> (4.0.52-53; emphasis added by me)

The study proposes that "mocking" and poetic "making" are at the heart of this play's very own "poetics" (18): "Above all, in H5, making is mocking" (172). In other words, Riecker claims that dramatic action, character development and even thought and (self-)reflection processes are expressed and represented through different kinds of "mocking" *in* as well as *by* Shakespeare's play. This is achieved by theatrical means (e.g. via roleplaying but also telling scene sequencing) as well as by linguistic ones (e.g. via the use of ambiguous modals) and concerns both the internal and external levels of communication of the play. The Chorus serves as a mediator between the two levels of story-world and metatheatrical frame, addressing the audience directly: "Yet sit and see". Instead of trying to resolve the ambiguities that pervade the play in action and word, Riecker's study proposes that the introduction and maintenance of the several "possibilities" the play offers represent an asset rather than a weakness of dramatic fiction (Chapter 6). This asset adds complexity and humanity to its historically-inspired protagonists and thus offers a valuable – though never 'truthful' – facet to historically inspired writing.

The suggestion that the play has its own "poetics" (18), mainly communicated and established through the Chorus (Chapters 1-3), can be understood as a 'guideline' to reading/viewing this play in particular as well as history plays in general (more on that below). Though this is not made quite explicit within the study, it emerges that the Chorus shares this 'guiding role' in how-to-read/view the play with Henry. Especially the latter – and longer – part of the study focuses almost exclusively on Henry's active as well as passive modes of "mocking" (Chapters 4 and 5). Actively, he mocks via roleplaying, most prominently so by repeatedly 'trying on' – and occasional 'dropping' (also in the Henry 4 plays) – the 'part' of 'King'. Here, the study's focus lies on Henry's

constant (re)negotiation with others as well as himself of the question whether or not he can be both private man *and* public sovereign (see 4.2), lover *and* King/soldier (Chapter 5). Henry also becomes part of a bigger kind of mock, in a more passive way and in connection to what Riecker calls "foils" (Chapter 4). This structural technique serves to "soun[d] out resemblances and contrasts" (172) between Henry and his several 'shadow' or alternative versions. Beginning with his alter ego Prince Hal, as well as with Hotspur in the H4 plays, Chapter 4 continues to explore parallels to the Dauphin and "Alexander the Pig" (Shakespeare 1995: 4.7.12-13) in H5.

The idea of "making" (18) pervades *Reflections on Fictionality*. Chapter 5, for instance, shows that, during the courtship of Kathrine, Henry first attempts to follow and then rewrites the role of the courtier as suggested by contemporary writers such as Castiglione (cf. 141): "*We* are the *makers* of manners" (Shakespeare 1995: 5.2.268-269; my emphasis). Riecker highlights the "We" as she makes the point that Kathrine, too, has at least some (linguistic) agency in this courtship game (Chapter 5.2). Likewise, in the scene taking place before the battle at Agincourt, Henry becomes "author, actor, and audience at once" (107-108) as he disguises himself as a common soldier to find out about the morale of the troop. Riecker argues convincingly that Henry quite self-consciously uses this particular instance of "mocking" to inspire the process of self-reflection that follows in the soliloquy that is to follow (Chapters 4.2.2 and 4.2.3). Playacting – and the "playing with possibility" (82) that goes with it – here become a mode of thinking.

While the analysis at times reads like a straightforward character study of Henry, Chapter 4 adds a further and intriguing element as it highlights the close interweaving of main and subplot(s), illustrating how they comment on and contradict each other. These "structural" (82) readings repeatedly reveal the intricate web of intratextual comment created by sequencing alone: who says or does what at which point? What has happened just before or will happen afterwards? How are word and action (dis)connected? An example is the sequence of the scene at Harfleur (Shakespeare 1995: 3.3.) followed by Kathrine's English lesson (3.4). At Harfleur, Henry threatens that his soldiers will "forc[e] violation" (3.3.21) on the "maidens" (3.3.20) of the city in case they should not surrender; during the English lesson, Katherine studies the language of the invader (see also Chapter 5.1.2). The threat of a violent public "conquest" of a city/country (Riecker 144) is thus parallelled with a future, maybe not exactly private, as Katherine is the daughter of the King of France, but yet a personal one realised in the union of princess and King Henry.

Relatedly, the study makes the strong point that although ambiguity in language and action may be a problem for historiography it is an asset of historical fiction and need *not* be resolved (cf. Chapter 2). The very fact that interpretations may be upheld simultaneously is what enables the 'literary process' of a reader or audience ready to engage with a text/performance by "minding" it (cf. 179). If there were no ambiguity, in other words, there would be no "work" (Shakespeare 1995: 3.0.25) left for the audience (see 180). "Minding true things by what their mockeries be" is a process of collaboration and co-creation

(Chapter 3). These ideas seem to be inspired as much by Reader Response Theory as by the early modern theorists Riecker works with – Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* (1589) as well as the Classical works of Aristotle and Quintilian that inspired both. Although she never aligns herself with particular reader-focused methodologies, it becomes clear that this is, for the most part, an audience/reader-focused study that works from the premise that it is the reader/audience who eventually makes the book/play (180).

Language, and especially its ambiguity, plays an important role in *Reflections on Fictionality*. As the study focuses on questions of "possibility" (Chapter 4), language becomes the driving force for potential and potentialities of performance. In this regard, Riecker discusses the ambiguity of modals (e.g. in Chapter 4.1.2), indexicals (Chapter 4.3.2) and the word "like" (e.g. Chapter 1, Chapter 5.1.3 and 106). The play with language and the room for possibility it holds generally has a destabilizing effect. The wordplay based on the verb "mock" in the Tennis Ball Scene at the beginning of the play, for example, quickly turns the idea of a harmless sportive activity into grim warfare (Chapter 2.2.1). The ambiguous modals used by the army captains in the subplot seriously question the king's authority and military ability in the main plot (Chapter 4.1). Here, Riecker reveals once more how main- and subplot intertwine and complicate each other.

The study's intricate linguistic analysis (see e.g. the word-by-word analysis of the key line "Minding true things by what their mockeries be" in Chapter 2), however, is sometimes problematic in scope rather than form. If we take the play and its linguistic "mocking" as seriously as Riecker generally does, we lose out on the ludic quality of the play. What is the function of wordplay and modes of "mocking" in H5? This question seems especially pressing to me when it comes to the many comic scenes which, as Riecker points out, are not reduced to the subplot only (see her comments on the Wooing Scene in Chapter 5). Thus, her in-depth analysis of Nym's utterance "It must be as it may" (Shakespeare 1995: 2.1.24; Riecker Chapter 4.1.2), while impressive in its detail, is perhaps slightly beside the point. By taking the sentence's mocking seriously rather than lightly, she recreates Henry's transformation of the rather harmless tennis into dangerous cannon balls and uses, so to speak, a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

An alternative and perhaps more fruitful approach might have been to highlight the nonsense apparent in the scene under discussion. While there surely is method to most literary nonsense (famous examples are, of course, the texts of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear), the sense it points to is not easily or effectively turned into a poetics. As E. Rettberg points out in his entry on "nonsense verse" in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

> Some consider nonsense a wide category that includes almost any verse [and other literary texts, I would add] that creates a fantastical world with its own rules, while others consider it a narrow category that includes only verse

> that disrupts the operations of lang[uage], typically by employing an abnormal syntax or invented words. (Rettberg 2012: 950)

The making of a "fantastical world with its own rules" connects well with the claim of *Henry V* having its own "poetics" (Riecker 18). However, this "world", I would claim, includes nonsensical and absurdist elements. While the matter of fact or literal reading of the nonsense language Riecker offers effectively shows how the comic characters "creat[e]" (Rettberg 2012: 950) and shape their world, it ignores that very world's more absurd aspects. Nonsense destabilizes and thus questions stable and/or conventional relationships between content and form – and this cannot only be connected to the play's understanding of history but also of the theatre itself. A critical question emerges: is it a serious – and 'historical' (whatever that may imply) – or a "fantastical" (Rettberg 2012: 950) world that H5 creates? And if it is, indeed, the latter, does that truly connect to the kind of "poetics" Riecker proposes, evoking a remaking of history rather than being (mostly) a comment on the workings of the theatre?

What does not altogether become clear in *Reflections on Fictionality* is the differentiation between history as a dramatic genre, historiography as a proto-academic practice in the early modern age, and history 'as it happened' (despite Riecker's discussion of "truth" on pages 27 and 28). The latter, of course, is never really 'true' or 'simple', and the former two are always influenced by the agendas of the time they were written in as well as the people who wrote them. There are hints in Riecker's study proposing that what fiction is particularly good at is presenting the complexities of past persons and actions (cf. Chapter 2). It may not do so 'truthfully' (a truth that can never be known anyway) but can offer valuable analogies in kind. The historical Henry was *not* Shakespeare's Henry, *nor* was he the one of historical chronicles such as the cited Holinshed's or Hall's (see 141 and 142), but in his very personhood and complex experience he was perhaps more *like* Shakespeare's Henry than the chronicles. If I may add the aspect of the ludic – the self-aware and open play with possibility as well as nonsense – there is never any danger of losing ourselves, whether audience or critic, in the illusionary force history as a genre of fiction holds.

At the end of Chapter 4, Riecker makes the following important point: "H5 being a history play, the audience knows how his story plays out" (135). Part of the ludic element of H5, then, is the audience's being aware of what is to happen. While the study thus acknowledges that, on the outer level of communication between play and audience, hindsight is important, she hardly addresses its implications – not even in Chapter 3 which is tellingly called "The Audience". The relationship between what the audience already knows – or potentially knows about English history in the early modern age – seems key to the many questions of "possibility" (82) Riecker's study addresses. This play with expectations, one could claim, is essentially enabled by the historical background of the story and the expectations it generates: the audience already knows what will and can happen. Agency, in that sense, is neither theirs nor that of the characters in the play.

So, a key question Riecker's study raises without fully answering it is whether the play is really trying to engage its audience in a *serious* conversation about history, what we can(not) know about it and 'should' learn from it (cf. Chapter 2.1 and 6.3), or whether is it rather approaching its historical theme from a more playful angle, nudging reflection processes in its audience by involving *and* entertaining them. As Shakespeare created Henry to think and live and fight and learn through play, does the audience not do the same? Why not embrace *fiction as fiction* as Riecker does so convincingly in other places of her study? This turning away from the ludic is probably also due to the heavy influence of Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) that underlies much of this study. For Sidney, theatrical 'make-do' is a problem, and he criticises the conventions common to the theatre of his time in quite ironic fashion: "Our Tragedies and Comedies (*not without cause cried out against*) observing rules neither of honest civility nor of skilful Poetry" (Sidney 2002: 110; my emphasis). He further complains about the staging conventions of his time:

> … where you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the player, when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived. Now ye shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of a shipwreck in the same place, and then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave. While in the meantime two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field? (110-11)

This need not, however, necessarily hold true for the way all early modern theatre-makers and audiences understood drama and its failings as well as merits. Riecker's overall analysis, though unconsciously, strengthens this very point: H5 plays a game with history and its very (un)representability, but it also plays one with its on- and off-stage audiences.

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