Equestri, Alice, *"Armine... thou art a foole and knaue". The Fools of Shakespeare's Romances*, Roma, Carocci, 2016, 200 pp.

Thanks to Alice Equestri's recent book, *"Armine… thou art a foole and a knave". The Fools of Shakespeare's Romances*, published by Carocci Editore (Rome 2016), the 'last plays' of Shakespeare (*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*), composed between the end of the first and the beginning of the second decade of the seventeenth century, reach us with renewed vigour. Far from suggesting a retreat into fantasy and magic, they engage instead in a search for a new form for modernity, implicitly inserted in a debate on the revision of the canonical dramatic forms that had already been going on in sixteenth-century Italy. It may be worthwhile observing that problems of form are already hinted at in *Hamlet*, with Polonius's often quoted remarks about the "pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited" (II.ii). Ridiculous as they may be, pedantic in relishing scholastic combinations of words, the four basic categories named by Polonius, that is "tragedy", "comedy", "history", "pastoral", in going beyond the traditional distinction between comedies and tragedies, led Heminge and Condell to use "histories" as well for their partition of the Folio, but "pastorals" – a promising opening, in our perspective – was left out, not read into.

However, it is through Shakespeare, mainly, that such formal issues become relevant to contemporaneity, when the breakthrough play of the modern theatre, *Waiting for Godot*, takes up an equivalent dramaturgical category as its subtitle: *A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. In fact, if on the one hand there is a fair degree of certainty over the chronological contiguity of the *romances*, critics cannot quite agree on a label that could denote them. In a way, this is already apparent in the Folio, where Shakespeare's theatrical works are arranged in subgenres, and where – whilst *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* is missing, for reasons of doubtful *authorship* – *Cymbeline* and *Timon of Athens* are placed in the group of the "Tragedies", whereas *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* are placed in the group of the "Comedies" (respectively at its beginning and end). Such a formal elusiveness points out to their experimental quality and openness: the label of 'tragicomedies'

is one of the most used; 'romances' suggests complementary ways of interpretation; 'last comedies' is less appropriate because it narrows the focus; 'last play'" is anything but a simple neutral definition, non-committal with respect to the preceding ones: 'last' conveys the 'sense of and ending', and gathers all Shakespeare's previous works in an *oeuvre*.

In Shakespeare's *oeuvre* the *fool*, given its shifting embodiments, is certainly a *leitmotiv*. A typical character of the theatrical repertory, at the hands of other playwrights the *fool* had previously owed much to the historical figure of the *jester* linked to medieval and sixteenth-century courts, whose duties – theatrical by reflection – consisted in musical and poetic performances, in witty remarks, in parodic imitations, in the displaying all the abilities of a juggler: all features within the boundaries of the comic *relief*. But Shakespeare endows it with a new density of language; makes it a source of concealed, ambiguous, painful truths, and a scourge to stiffened social pretensions; finally, a means of and to knowledge. Hamlet, the unique and totalizing *fool* of his own tragedy, has a clear outline for the previous *fool:* "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times". He goes on, addressing the skull of poor Yorick, both to evoke a private memory and to signal a historical change: "Where be your jibes now? your gambols? your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?" (*Hamlet*, V.i).

Equestri's book joins productively two crucial areas of the critical discourse on the work of the great playwright (the *romances*, the *fool*), inserting organically the figure of the *fool* in the tissue and in the semiotic system of the text. It joins in a well-established trend of Shakespearean studies, aimed at the world of the *performance*, and at unravelling the connections between the text and the material structures of the theatre and its life in the Elizabethan-Jacobean society. The actors, and their companies, are an essential aspect of this picture, and Equestri reasserts it in the first of the three main chapters of her book, dedicated to the actor Armin (significantly, the title of the volume is referred to the actor, while the subtitle to the play itself). After William Kempe left the Chamberlain's Men, at the turn of the century, it was Robert Armin, of a small frame and physically ungraceful, who took over as the new implicit receiver and

assignee of the parts that Shakespeare wrote with Armin's actorial qualities in mind, bound to achieve greater poetic effect. It is justifiable, on this basis, to follow the several features that connect transversally the characters taken over by Armin, that go from Boult, to Cloten, to Autolycus, to Caliban. In the 'servant' Boult – whose name refers to the door hinges, the doors of the brothel of which he's the keeper (the connection is accurately demonstrated, since the pimp had also the task of entertaining the clients with music, and exerting his *wit* to increase the value of the women of the 'bawdy house') – it will then be the case of considering not only the coexistence of the 'knave' and the *fool*, but also of identifying the transition from one to the other guise. Thus, from being the sarcastic lash of his master, Boult ends up a *pimp*. Something similar is argued for a character like Caliban, whose historical culture (Vaughan) is by now extremely rich, starting from the renowned designation in *dramatis personae* of the Folio ("A savage and deformed Slave"). Yet at a certain point, in his association with Trinculo and with Stephano, Caliban as well takes up the typical features of the *fool*.

With philological and historical accuracy Equestri outlines a wide range of forms, meanings and associations of which the word *fool* is bearer (of characters conveying the role: "country rustics", "servants", "knights", "soldiers", "foolish officers", "professional court jesters", or "nobler figures endowed with the wise-fool logic"). Consequently, new perspectives open up in terms of the matching of the four plays taken into consideration. Whereas, starting from the above-mentioned division of the Folio, and according both to chronology and to criteria of critical and theatrical success, one associates *Cymbeline* and *Timon* on the one side, and *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* on the other, the criteria that focus on the specific character of the *fool* – underlining points of contact among equivalent characters – lead here to associate instead *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*. As a result, the 'underworld fool' marks the first group, whereas the 'natural fool' characterizes the second, so that these types feature in the titles of the second and the third chapter of the book, respectively.

Equestri draws on valuable and accurate historical documents, providing a list of the critical literature on the social transformation that, in Shakespeare's time, resulted in the marginalization of great

numbers of people who were pushed beyond the limits of poverty and crime. Moreover, her work brings to bear on the literary characters under scrutiny the physiological and medical knowledge of the time in ways that are particularly helpful for other interested scholars and researchers. For example, the 'natural fool' might be attributed jutting eyes, prominent lips in the eversion of the lower lip or in the indent of the upper one, a mouth open and flabby, and a particular cranial conformation, marked by the presence or not of the sutures. Thus a closer bond is unearthed between Cloten and Caliban, who are associated further by their 'devilish mothers'.

The numerous references to its class placement enshrine the *fool* in a realistic aura, as is also testified by the almost synonymous term 'clown'. It is therefore understandable that he is assigned so much of the balancing weight with respect to the equally marked disposition towards the marvellous that is present in the last plays; a marvellous that is both in the alexandrine freedom of the plot (the sea voyage, an improbable geography, pirates…), and in the happy resolution of the fantastic events, in the restoration of order and of life itself: as if by grace – and it has been observed that the term 'grace' has an unusual strength in these plays. The 'masterless' Autolycus proves an example of realistic strain. He is a character that mirrors the upheaval caused by the "enclosures" (p. 72), the proximity between the condition of vagrancy and criminality, and even a documented and historical migration of similarly destitute people from Scotland towards Bohemia (p. 81). On the other hand, he hints at the sometimes very difficult plight of actors and artists, not sufficiently talented to succeed in providing themselves with aristocratic protection. Because he is masterless, a vagrant, and an outcast, Autolycus comes to the foreground as a powerful travesty for the artist, with felicity and ease of linguistic invention, extraordinary rhetorical *wit*, and a peculiar poetic turn ("his use of song ad poetry", p. 75), even though instrumental to 'coney-catching'.

In this respect one could also underline, in conclusion, how the text magnifies the difference of this type of *fool* from the one we come across in *Lear*. While in that tragedy the satiric function applies itself against the old and dethroned king, Autolycus targets the varied social specimens of a country fair. For a noteworthy historical transition, one could argue that Lear – a king whose catastrophic

stubbornness and blindness warns both audience and readers against the flaws of monarchic absolutism – corresponds exactly to the type of *fool*; instead, the tragicomic dimension of the last plays, to match a more uncertain and protean political and social climate, demands the transformism of Autolycus (p. 73), and a wider field of action, such as the one provided by the fair. Equestri appropriately stresses that Autolycus comes from the court, from which in fact he has been banished (p. 70). It is one of the many critically perceptive remarks that further enhance the value of her book.

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Vaughan, Virginia Mason, Antony and Cleopatra: *Language and Writing,* **London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015, xvii+160 pp.**

This volume is part of the "Arden Student Skills: Language and Writing" series edited by Dympna Callaghan, with a view to providing analytical guidance to college students in their reading of – and writing about – Shakespeare's works. The book is beautifully orchestrated: starting with a general historical, cultural and philological introduction and overview of *Antony and Cleopatra*, it then proceeds to a close-reading of the text. The focus on language – a follow up of the author's editorial work on the original Folio text of *Antony and Cleopatra* for the *Norton Shakespeare* – addresses in particular composition techniques matching the rhythm of the poetic line with the emotions being expressed, thus highlighting "Shakespeare's masterful fusion of sound and sense" (p. xiii). The volume is divided into three main sections: 1. "Language in print: Reading and performance", 2. "Forms and uses", 3. "Language through time: Changing interpretations after Shakespeare", each aiming to encourage students to develop their own interpretations and engage in critical writing of their own – openly demonstrated in the crucial "Writing matters" conclusion to each section – providing them with tools to convey ideas "in a clearly written and well researched essay" (p. xii).

The core of Virginia Mason Vaughan's interpretation – blending the plot of a great love tragedy with that of a world-wide political conflict at the outset of Roman Empire – lies in a careful analysis of