Lord of misrule

Peter K. Andersson on a real court jester who inspired Shakespeare
Robert Putnam's bleak account of the erosion of social capital, Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community, was a talking point across the political spectrum at the turn of the millennium. Early in the nineteenth century that keen social observer Alexis de Toqueville marveled at Americans' enthusiasm for working for the common good through civic associations, churches and town hall meetings. Putnam, however, provided extensive statistical evidence for the decline of these little platoons in an increasingly atomized society. To illustrate his point in microcosm, Americans no longer played with friends and family or in clubs, but bowed alone. So when this prophet of doom suggests that society may have reached a turning point for the better, we ought to sit up and pay attention.

Putnam and Shylain Romney Garrett's The Upswing sees correspondences between America today and a hundred years ago. Inequality, political partisanship, cultural narcissism and declining social capital were then challenged by a Progressive movement which found adherents in both the Republican and the Democratic parties. There followed a "long arc of increasing solidarity" from the golden period of the New Deal onwards "and then increasing individualism" after the 1960s. It is "the most fundamentally self-centeredness" that accounts for the present-day malaise, says the authors. Our reviewer Paul Collier is an admiral of their essentially moral project. The shift from an "I" society to a "we" society won't be led by economics but by a sea change in ideas.

Have we reached such an inflection point? A few observations and questions. The middle decades of the twentieth century saw the Great Depression followed by the Second World War - enormous upheavals that created a sense that "we're all in it together" - followed by greater stability and affluence. But as the generations that lived through those dark times died off, so social solidarity waned. Have the financial crisis and the Covid epidemic provided as great a unifying shock? America's fractured society also poses great challenges. The problem may be not so much that it's more of an "I" society than a "we" society, but that it is a polarized society. There are two big "we's" - call them conservatives and liberals - and they don't seem to be able to agree on anything. Or to compromise.

If society's ill get you down, take comfort in Shakespeare. Emma Smith pays tribute to the complete Arden edition and Peter K. Andersson uncovers a fascinating jester at Queen Bess's court who gets namechecked more than once in the plays.

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Come together right now
The days of rampant individualism are over

PAUL COLLIER
THE UPSWING
How we came together a century ago and how we can do it again
ROBERT D. PUTNAM WITH SHAYLIN ROMNEY GARRETT
448pp. Swift Press. £25.

MISSION ECONOMY
A moonshine guide to changing capitalism
MARIANA MAZZUCATO

THE WHEELS OF SOCIETY
Its assembly, performance and emotion
TONY WILSON

Having become widely recognized as the man who best understood Italy’s flourishing, Robert D. Putnam promised his wife “no more books”. We must be thankful for his treachery. His latest effort, The Upwing, written with the support of Shaylin Romney Garrett, constitutes the apex of a lifetime’s scholarship. It is original and important, and uplifting precisely when that is most needed. It opens with a brilliant tease: a seven-page summary of the acute social ill of America’s manifestly broken society. We nod, but feel a little impatient: we already know this. Thus we are lulled: Putnam is describing the US not in 2020 but in 1980. The Upwing builds on another celebrated concept of “social capital”: the web of non- contractual associational relationships that constitutes a community. The idea acquires normative force through that word capital – the claim that these relationships are in aggregate not merely enjoyable but productive. In particular, they are able to generate and enforce common purposes. Putnam initially used the concept to explain the divergence between a now-prosperous northern Italy and a now dysfunctional southern one. With originality and courage, he traced northern success back to the eleventh century, when the north’s cities fostered webs of mutually trustworthy relationships. These developed through citizens’ participation in devolved associations, both political and social – emblematically, in churches. In contrast, the south was invaded by Norman gangs who imposed feudalism, their hierarchical suppression of independent associations helping to establish an autocratic state juxtaposed against privileged individuals. Putnam then made a radical inference: since the political institutions of Italy’s regions had been common for over a century, yet had led to wide differences in outcomes, institutions were not enough; democracy only succeeded if preceded by social capacity. He had the courage to entitle his study Making Democracy Work (1993).

Putnam next applied this concept to the US, warning controversially at the time – in Bowling Alone (2000) – that American social capital had gone into decline as people retreated into individualism. The Upwing is a magnificent expansion of that hypothesis, charting not just this continuing decline but a prior increase in social capital during the first half of the twentieth century. Not only does Putnam write engagingly of the factors that caused this U-turn (a chapter entitled “American Eclipse” is followed by an inverted-U: based on a wide range of ingenious indicators; he relates this closely to other socioeconomic, political and cultural changes, all of which follow similar trajectories.

Many of these indicators are commonly used proxies for the concept they track, such as cross-party collaboration as proxied by congressional roll-calls, or bipartisanship among voters as proxied by ticket-splitting. Putnam’s masterstroke is to bring them together in coherently weighted clusters; they convince through cumulation. Many others of his indicators are original, and some are amassing Putnam associates rising social capital with a sense of mutual concern for wellbeing, its obverse being the self-assertion of individuality. He shows that this is true literally as well as metaphorically. Through the program Ngram, he searches all American books published since 1875, tracking the relative frequency of “we” and “me”. Amazingly, this hugely wide cultural net casts up the same snake shape as the other indicators. By 1900 American society has descended into a trough – it is a “me” society not matched again until 2000, when it plunges into previously unfathomed depths of self-absorption. The inference from that snake is that, since we once climbed out of a syndrome of individualism, economic inequality and plutocratic politics, we can do so again.

The snake has a further implication: between the upswings and downswings were times of inflection. Putnam identifies two crucial turning points when decades of monotonic changes in all these variables suddenly went into reverse: the upsurv around 1900 and the subsequent downturn in the 1960s, starting in a Larkinesque 1963, peaking with the events of 1968, and then degenerating into the violence of the Weathermen, Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigades. As a sourcebook-bureaucrat, I recall this period intimately and embarrassingly. While on the cultural barricades, we did not see ourselves as tearing apart social capital: we thought that we were tearing down the institutions of capitalism. But of course, the institutions survived and instead it was the destruction of civility, of mutually respectful dialogues, that we helped to bring about. I recall attending a meeting of the Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students – not a parody – during which we were urged to stand up and denounce any suspect peers in the assembly. What, then, were the forces that account for these two inflection points? Since the cultural, social, political and economic indicators all have trajectories with this general snake shape, Putnam accepts that they may all have turned together due to some major external shock. He also accepts that they are likely to be interdependent. But a few indicators turn before the rest, leading both the upswing and downswing, and a few others consistently turn later. Identifying cause and effect from sequence can be a snare.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc is a fallacy. But since the laggard variables cannot be the initial cause, the approach is valid for falsification. So, in the quest for that cause, we can exclude the laggard, leaving both a common shock and the leading variable as credible candidates. If we accept a degree of interdependence, momentum can, once kicked off, be seen to pick up, each change in one variable nudging others, analogously to an avalanche. So, what indicator can be excluded as an explanation? Putnam finds that economic inequality is the lagging variable: it is a consequence, not cause. His leading variable is culture, and the ideas underpinning cultural change, churning with J. M. Keynes’s dictum that ideas, though dismissed by “practical men”, are decisive. We should be hunting for both sea changes in ideas and for common shocks. I begin with the ideas.

During the inflection point around 1900, the cultural change was the progressivism, especially in the US, led by pragmatist centrists such as George Henry’s Progress and Poverty (1879) went on to become the nineteenth century’s bestseller in the US, behind only the Bible. The Progressive Movement was cross-party, non-ideological and locally led, by both mayors and ordinary citizens. (James Hankins’s recent book, Virtue Politics – TLS, February 12, 2021 – is particularly rich.) With the Renaissance (Italy) Teddy Roosevelt was its national champion: a centrist Republican who believed in pragmatic experimentation and mutual responsibility. His moralized free high school education was almost entirely achieved from a bottom-up approach. Businesses were drawn in. In 1905 an enterprising young man from Iowa, unaccustomed to the anomie of Chicago, organized a social club with the common purpose that businesses should help their local communities. Thus the Rotary Club was born.

In the 1960s, the equivalent idea – swelling into internal shifts that turned into an avalanche – was the primacy of the individual: something that had begun to take root in academic social science during the previous decade. Culprits for the rise of “me” included “we”, and the rise of the academic disciplines, including to this day. Economics has contributed a huge edifice of normative policy analysis built up from a highly individualist account of behaviour (Nurmi economics) (see TLS, December 6, 2019). Within this edifice, the only criterion for a good society is a Friedmanian “freedom of individual choice” – a concept that keeps coming to grief each time it collides with common purposes, as exemplified by the current pandemic. In parallel, political philosophy has built a normative policy analysis on an equivalently individualist theory of “human rights”. Again, this leaves little place for the concept of common good: the counterpart to individual rights is the obligation of the state to deliver them. This tension also keeps coming to grief: what happens when a claimed right collides with your claim?

To note the shocks, Putnam argues that what proved decisive in both inflections was the coincidence of a shift in ideas with “concatenated crises”. For example, the tide he sets against quite plausibly Vietnam, which brought students onto the streets and toppled President Johnson, shortly followed by the oil shock and stagflation. In discrediting the competence of authority, these catastrophes fortuitously demonstrated the costs of revolution: our institutions were rotten. The shocks he emphasizes for 1900 were the horrors of rapid, industrially driven urbanization: squalid living conditions and brutal employers. And, perhaps too,
We know from international data that the UK is a complete outlier - the most centralized country in the OECD, and the most spatially unequal

those objectives rather than admitting to their folly.

The first grandiose moonshot was the postwar grand strategy of spreading the benefits of the Marshall Aid tracts of Britain's territory in today's Tanzania with peanuts: a centralized, context-ignoreant fantasy which proved to be hugely wasteful. That was Old Labour, New Labour had its own, techglamour version in the form of a world-beating NHS data system. This would have been by far the largest system ever built and nobody knew how to do it. It was abandoned eleven years later, wildly over-budget.

Where there is a vital objective but uncertainty as to how to achieve it, the best approach is not a politically managed moonshot but public commitment to many possible moonshots working in parallel. Since only one needs to work, this looks wasteful: most of the approaches will fail or become redundant, and journalists will get easy copy. But this approach is pragmatic and effective. The current success in vaccine discovery and distribution is such a case. By bringing in capable people with business expertise, rather than selecting a strategy himself, Boris Johnson has laid the groundwork that it has not only been able to execute it, but that the pharmaceutical companies have been able to execute it.

Health services and businesses have understood the need to devote agency to independent teams: large orders for parallel approaches would unblock bottlenecks in research, and localization to the volunteers was speeded up everywhere. Not only was the payoff enormous, the strategy was fairly low-risk: some discovery was likely.

As with health policy, so with regional inequalities: the London and urban communities, but it is not through spad designed moonshots directed from Whitehall to revolve Sheffield. We need a pledge that the inequalities in productivity and incomes will be addressed, it has to be matched by the same sort of current failure to focus instead on common purposes and the pragmatic approach to achieve them. The goal must be to overturn today's arisocracies of privilege, whether spatial, temporally, spatially or by age, or even the more recent ones of celebrity and victimhood. But for all to contribute, all must be equipped to do so, and since many are not, their empowerment is the first priority. The concept of inclusion and mutuality is the essence of Sandel's powerful concept of "comparative justice". A just society continuously responds to its major socio-economic stresses by building new common purposes: in the UK, for example, this might mean equalizing public finance for training between those going to universities and those not; and for upstarts between the South East and贴合地.

In the context of the unique Moonshot that is Brexit and common purposes, forging strategies that demand something of all of us - new mutual responsibilities.

In Mission Economy Mariana Mazzucato has a rather different approach to meeting new stresses. She believes those in charge should launch "moonshots". She likes to tell us that global leaders are paying a lot of attention to what she says, and this is indeed surprisingly surprising given they all too condescendingly agree. This is an example of a very pragmatic, step-by-step learning from experiments. Then she advocates moonshots - and I balk.

The term comes from President Kennedy's brilliant response to the vast prestige that the Soviet Union had gained from stealing a march in space exploration. Kennedy's unequivocal commitment to put an American on the moon by 1968 galvanized science, business and government to accomplish it. However, more than often not, such grandiose schemes tend to founder and waste resources, making it perhaps easier for the Moonshot-driven Mazzucato to delineate the kinds of public partnerships for which such commitments make sense, while the mere three pages she devotes to leadership are breathtakingly superficial. In recent years, the problem with British public policy has been a different sort of commitment by politicians than of its very opposite: a proliferation of extravagant objectives that have turned out to be unfeasible. Having locked themselves in politically, leaders have kept throwing vast sums at putting things right. But the underlying community and individualism, providing the social foundations for the correct cultivation of a real and healthy middle class, is not the only issue.
Rising price of status anxiety

Does social mobility make us happy?

PETER MANDLER

SNAKES AND LADDERS
The great British social mobility myth

SELINA TODD

448pp. Chatto and Windus. £25.

Social mobility has become such a cherished ideal, deployed by politicians of all stripes for whatever immediate purpose they choose, that it is now thoroughly encrusted with myth. Most social mobility is not as one might imagine "rags to riches", but slow, arduous progress through subtle gradations of income and occupation. It is not principally driven by education, but rather more on the structure of the labour market - are more "good jobs" being created? - or the distribution of income - are the rungs of the ladder closer together or further apart? And it is not always a good thing. In a more equal society with more mobility, as many people would be falling as rising. In a less equal society, upward mobility brings with it stress, anomie and competitors with a hidden arsenal of social and cultural capital (and a less hidden arsenal of real capital) which any amount of talent or hard work struggles to match.

Many sociologists and an economist or two have tried to address these myths by explaining more precisely what kind of social mobility happens in our society and why. On the whole politicians ignore them, and in truth their approaches are too abstract or, often, too wooden to catch the public's imagination. It is good to have a historian joining the fray. Historians, bless us, can take full advantage of our incomplete evidence and our artistic licence to make our stories more vivid and palatable to wider audiences. Selina Todd starts out by gallantly churning up the past hundred years or so into seven generations, subjectively defined either to reflect her evidence or to suit her argument or both. She neatly personifies these tens of millions of people - "pioneers" before the First World War, the "golden generation" after the Second World War who enjoyed the maximum of upward and the miniaturization of downward mobility, the "magicians" of the 1970s and 1980s, the more familiar "Thatcher's children" and "millennials". Using a rich blend of evidence - Mass-Observation directives (including one she designed herself); careers painlessly reconstructed from business archives, social surveys and statistics - she personifies these tens of millions even more specifically with anecdotes of individual life courses and the autobiographies of the more celebrated. Nick Leeson, Nicola Horlick, Morrissey all play their walk-on parts. Unlike the social scientists, she is not content to rest on the brute facts of mobility - who goes up? Who goes down? Why? How far? - but also the experience. What kinds of aspirations do people have? Who is able to achieve them? What are they worth? What are the kinds of mobility that seem to make people happiest? The results are stories that read well and, in their own terms, ring true, not just intellectually, but emotionally.

On the other hand, that same incomplete evidence and artistic licence allows the historian to impose her own divine plan on past actors, playing favourites with her personifications of generations and her cherry-picking of individual lives. The "pioneers" are hailed for their solidaristic political ambitions as they build trade unions and socialist organisations to struggle for democracy. The "magicians" are drop-outs and do-it-yourselfers who form feminist collective, punk rock groups, supermarket co-operatives and - a particular favourite of Todd's - "community arts" organisations. More conventional aspirations are properly acknowledged but often lead to no good. The public sector is rightly given a lot of credit for opportunities that lift many people up, but even at its peak in the 1970s it employed barely a quarter of the workforce. Todd is less interested in what creates opportunity in the private sector, though she appreciates that private-sector investment in human capital and on-the-job training is just as if not more important than state-funded education.

Her efforts to align very tightly improvements in equity with changes of government are not always credible. The size of the private sector in education doesn't vary much over time but she makes a lot of the little blips, all supposed to be upward under the Tories and downward under Labour. Nor I think does she sufficiently understand the limits of social mobility chimed well with the flat assertion that "The golden age of social mobility ended abruptly thanks to Margaret Thatcher's election as Conservative prime minister in 1979."

Still, the same qualities of personal and political commitment convey well the mounting sense of dread and anxiety about the life-course that have characterised the 2000s, and she is able to tell us why, while all along pundits continue to chatter cheerfully about "social mobility". Successive hammer blows - the global financial crisis of 2007-08, ten years of austerity, private dissatisfaction with public services, the privatisation of national assets and, now the global pandemic - have surely cast doubt on people's own experience on the sunny uplands to which they are constantly being promised. If the social democratic and conservative narratives that historians are able to punctuate the credibility of politicians' slogans, then, it is in the spirit of Selina Todd's book to believe - at least to hope - that that sustained experience might eventually make all the difference.

Faith, feminism and joy

A campaigning journalist looks at the meagre rewards of the US benefits system

SONIA FALEIRO

HAD I KNOWN
Collected essays

BARBARA EHRENREICH


For four decades the author and activist Barbara Ehrenreich has been writing about inequality in the US. Had I Known gathers some of her best-known reportage in a collection that covers gender, faith, feminism and joy, but it is most interesting for its insights into that aspect of life to which the media still pays little heed: "In no year did poverty coverage even come close to accounting for as little as one percent of the news hole", reported the Pew Research Centre after indexing stories from major outlets between 2007 and 2012. The collection's first essay "Nickle-and-Dimed: On (not) getting by in America" (1999) is Ehrenreich's most famous, and best, vividly written and full of eye-opening details. Having originally appeared in Harper's, it was expanded into a full-length book in 2001 and became a bestseller. For this undercover plunge into the low-wage workforce, Ehrenreich worked as a cleaner, a burger worker and got by on canned beans. She quickly learnt that her country's idea of a "living wage" wasn't enough to lift people out of poverty, or even to protect them from homelessness. "There are no secret economies to nourish the poor", she writes.

On the contrary, there are a host of special costs. If you can't put up the two months' rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only one room, with a hot plate at best, you can't save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead. You eat fast food.

Ehrenreich's father was a copper miner in Montana. He was "over six feet tall, looked like Dean Martin, and could outdrink any competitor", she writes. He was also, it appears, something of a genius. Having doggedly attended night school, he won a scholarship to Carnegie Mellon University. Ehrenreich went on to get her PhD in cell biology before becoming a campaigning journalist. Her wide-ranging interests give her the impression that she has a stake in everything.

In another strong entry, "Are Illegal Immigrants the Problem?" (2008), Ehrenreich places responsibility for the plight of undocumented workers squarely at the feet of uncritical Americans. What makes these immigrants attractive, she says, is that "when you rip them off, they have no recourse at all ... If you don't want undocumented immigrants competing with Americans for jobs, stop the exploitation of the immigrants and make sure they work under the same laws and regulations as anyone else". In "Outclassed" (2017), which she writes with journalist Alissa Quinn, Ehrenreich shows that media stories about sexual harassment are deeply skewed by social class: actresses and influencers hog the headlines while it is working-class and women in non-glamorous occupations who really bear the brunt of male lechery and assault: the housekeepers, waitresses and farmworkers. This is a significant moment for sharing our stories, Ehrenreich reminds us, while calling out against a perpetuation of the class divisions that have long existed in the feminist movement.

Ehrenreich can be a powerful writer but she has one tone - wry. And it can wear you down. She also tends to bury her ledes so that, even three pages in, her subject can remain unclear. Positive thinking? Yoga? Tipping? Her essays have a quality of sameness, whereas her opinions on race can be alarming. In "Nickle-and-Dimed" she describes a black couple who grow impatient with the slow restaurant service as looking "ready to summon the NAACP". In "Dead, White and Blue" (2015) she links the declining life span of poor white men to the fact that the "psychological wage" awarded to white people has been shrinking. With no scientific evidence to back up her claim, she declares that "recession may give a potent invitation to the kind of despair that leads to suicide".

What enables a piece of writing to withstand the test of time? Many of the subjects in Barbara Ehrenreich's book certainly hedge that today as they did when they were first written. But that alone is not enough. Reading this collection feels like an act of virtue - and ends up being a slog.
Edward Said

The problem with Robert Irwin's heartfelt, even endearingly vulnerable, review of my Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said (March 12) is that he is unfamiliar with all of Said's points of departure. This leads him frequently to miss his mark and to several inaccuracies. He claims, for example, that I stake out personal territory already covered by Said's memoir, Out of Place. This is far from the case. Despite its novelistic appeal, the memoir divulges almost nothing about his sisters, his explosive first marriage to Maire Jaunes, his apprenticeship under the right-wing British diplomat Charles Malik, his fascinating pre-1967 political writing, his attempts at fiction and poetry, his traumatic head-on car crash with a motorcyclist in Switzerland, the important initiatives he took from his wife and children, his intimate friendship with Arafat and the Syrian radical Sadik al-Azm, and many other matters treated for the first time in my biography. And, of course, Said's memoir abruptly ends with him upon leaving medieval college, leaving out what are undoubtedly the most interesting parts of his life.

Irwin also complains that I was unfair to say that the timing of the publication of my own book was determined by the timeliness of Said's informational history of the Orientalist field, For Lust of Knowing (2000), "suggests cowardice," since, he writes, with two other authors of book-length attacks on Said's bestseller (Daniel Martin Varisco and myself), we waited almost thirty years to publish our polemics. Said's death has left us all in a state of shock, and it is only in literary theory had everything to do with his success and was at the core of his argument in Orientalism that even "disinterested" scholars can be part of an impartialistic common sense. This is what I wanted to convey, too, and I am willing to say that if this view is somewhat unpalatable, then so be it, but it is very close to the subject matter is so close to him that he cannot bear it personally.

Timothy Brennan
University of Minnesota

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TLS
APRIL 20, 2021
The fool and the rock

Reflecting on the roles of the Duke of Edinburgh

A. N. WILSON

King Lear, when blasted out on to the heath by his unkind children, was accompanied by the two inverted vases, necessary to him, his Fool and his loyalbenchman Kent (in disguise). Perhaps every monarch, every head of state, needs both a Fool, to puncture their self-importance, and a Kent, who will be seen, but not heard, through the worst of times. The Duke of Edinburgh combined both roles. He was both our Queen's court jester and her rock.

He proved himself in the first capacity on the day of her Coronation. His first question to her, as she processed out of the Abbey, her young head weighed down by St Edward's Crown, was “Where did you get that hat?” On their first tour of the Commonwealth, the Queen's spirits sank in Australia, the situation reached 110 degrees, and she pined for the rain-soaked heather of Balnairn. Her husband was heard saying, “Cheer up, sausage, it's not so bad as all that.” Of course, his majesty's sense of humour was in most quarters as “gaffes”, as he said to the President of Nigeria, who was arrayed in national costume, “You look ready for bed”. My favourite is when the Queen was leaning over a man injured by an IRA bomb, asking him how much sight he retained. “Not a lot”, said the Duke, “judging by that tie”.

I only met him once. He attended a dinner held to commemorate the Queen's sixtieth year on the throne. He was well into his nineties. Before the meal, he went around the room and spoke to the sixty or so men and women present – every one. He addressed each one personally, his voice clear and firm, like the sound of finding it tedious, though of course none of us would have felt we had had the “Prince Philip experience” if he had been enervated. There was always the firm hand on the shoulder, the arm around the neck. When he came up to me, he asked what I was doing, and I said I was writing the life of Albert, the Prince Consort. His face darkened. “Not another bloody book on Prince Albert”, he said. I protested – there never had been a full biography, based on all available archival sources. He looked unconvinced. Then, just before we went into dinner, and having worked the room, he returned to me. “Just had a thought”, he said. “Prince Albert had a very short life, so you could write a very short book.”

Anne Griffiths, his archivist for many years, told me that Philip was in fact obsessed by Prince Albert and by his legacy. The two had much in common, and Philip learnt very important lessons from his predecessor in the role of Queen’s husband. Albert was a conscientious man, who worked hard, and once he had arrived in England, to conceal either his Germanness or his cleverness. Prince Philip, when he married Princess Elizabeth only two years after the end of the Second World War, was ready enough to keep his identity under wraps. It suited him very well for the tabloid press to think he was “Phil the Greek”, and for the fastidious English courtiers to think of him as a coarse-grained oaf who would bring the monarchy into disrepute. But as Germans, from Goethe onwards, culturally appropriated Greece, they naturally put themselves forward, when the modern state of Greece was carved out of the Ottoman Empire and made independent, as the kings of that new land. There is nothing “Greek” about the Greek royal family, except their allegiance to the Church. Prince Philip never descended on his father’s side from Princess Alice of Hesse-Darmstadt, the most melancholy of Queen Victoria's daughters.

Philip was born in 1921 on the kitchen table of his family’s villa on the island of Corfu, Mon Repos. His father, Prince Andrew, was shown penniless out of the royal family of Greece the next year. Andrew led the life of a playwright in Monte Carlo, with a string of girlfriends, each less suitable than the last. Philip’s mother, Alice, profoundly deaf, humiliated repeatedly by her husband’s infidelity and religious as perhaps only Orthodox women can be (she was converted to that faith in 1928, and then became a sort of nun of her own devising and wore a religious habit), was bipolar. She was treated by Sigmund Freud, who was unable to save her. Philip, had not had carnal knowledge of Our Saviour. They incarcerated her at the Bellevue clinic at Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, for nearly three years, under the care of Dr Ludwig Sinowanger.

Alice recovered her sanity after the tragedy of an aircraft crash in which her daughter Cécile and two grandchildren were killed. Philip, a schoolboy at Gordonstoun, was devastated. The Germany to which Philip returned for the family funeral, in 1957, was a scary place, not least because so many of his relations were enthusiastic for the regime of Hitler. Philip did not join the government, who went to live in a flat in Athens throughout the Second World War. Only after her death it was revealed that though she was herself poor, frequently hungry and vulnerable, she had concealed a family fortune in the good old days, persuading the Gestapo that Mrs Cohen was a (gentile) former governess of her children.

Philip said, “As far as we know, she never mentioned anyone that she had given refuge to the Cohen family at the time when all Jews in Athens were in great danger of being arrested and transported to the concentration camps. I suspect that it never occurred to her that her actions, in any way special. She would have considered it to be a totally natural human action to fellow beings in distress”.

Philip buried his mother in the Russian convent on the Mount of Olives.

If the Queen’s father, George VI, had not been a chain-smoker whose habit killed him at the age of fifty-six, Philip might have expected to enjoy a long and distinguished career in the Royal Family to which he was ideally suited. As Lieutenant Commander Mountbatten, he got his first command, of the frigate HMS Magpie, in 1950. He was a martinet. One of the officers serving under him said he would rather die than repeat the expression, but the men liked him. He was always good at being a man among men. When he was eighty-five, two days after a whirlwind tour of the Baltic states with the Queen, he flew out to Russia to make a surprise visit to the Queen Mother's USSR, of which he was Colonel in Chief. He was dressed in combat gear and the visit, typically, had not been too well-received. Lance Corporal Dean Munn, aged twenty-two, remarked, "It was good to see him here in these hard conditions, taking time to see us and how we're doing". The off-colour jokes and the laddish behaviour with women, which had supposedly clouded the earlier stages of his married life, would only have enhanced his standing with these men.

There was endless speculation about the many women with whom, as we gutter journalists like to say, his name was linked. Although Kitty Kelley, in The Royals (1997), claimed to have come up with new evidence, the more remarkable truth is that no woman ever spilled the beans in his lifetime. One of two possible facts is thereby revealed. Either was – as his friend and biographer Gyles Brandreth claimed in Philip and Elizabeth (2004) – in fact loyal to his wife for over seventy years of marriage, in spite of many flirtations and close relationships with other women, or, if there were mistresses, his dalliances were completely discreet.

The point is that he was loyal in all that mattered. He stood by the Queen. Literally. No one who witnessed it will ever forget the day of the Diamond Jubilee, when the sun shone on the Queen and her even older husband were placed aboard a splendid launch, surrounded by gondoliers and cutters of the City Liveries Companies. The organists had imagined a glory of sound and splendour, with sunlight sparkling on the sweet Thames as it ran softly. Instead, rain bucketed, and the old royal people, when shown to their velvet cushions on the boat, found these to be absolutely soaked and standing there with the only option, to stand, and standing there in their uniform, ramrod-straight and without complaint, stayed with all of us.

Virginia Woolf used to say that childless couples always made a point of standing at the back, and Elizabeth, in their complementary double act, plainly stood for the monarchy: the golden thread running through the nation. And whether he was encouraging the Duke with his Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes, attending an endless series of state banquets and meeting innumerable processions of foreign diplomats and potentates, or being, as I suggested at the outset, both fool – or, as one put it, “rock. Philip’s role in that partnership was vital.

It is not an accident that for much of the time, it always seemed as if it was just the two of them, and in the midst of the children, they did not add to it. The recent troubles of the Duke of York are really only the grotesque culmination of a story of atrocious parenting, stretching back over seven entangled years – a dreadful modern tradition. Philip had parents who would be an embarrassment to anyone, but he always spoke of them in glowing terms. Of his children, some of whom, some of the time, were visibly doing their best, he was much less generous. The abrasive Princess Anne was his kind of girl, but the sons had a tough time of it. His first-born was bullied and misunderstood by his father from the first. No doubt there would be those who saw very psychological explanations for this, and it is a royal tradition that monarchs hate their heirs – witness Queen Victoria and Bertie, George III and George IV, and many others.

Once, at a London dinner where the Duke of Edinburgh was the guest of honour, silence fell round the table while two of the guests, unaware for a few moments that they had an audience, continued their prattle. One of the speakers was someone who had to do professionally with both the Prince of Wales and his father. He was contrasting the Duke of Edinburgh (efficient, brusque, quick) with his son (unreliable, uncertain, often very slow to show the right tact). Many fathers – most fathers, perhaps – would protest at overhearing such talk. The Duke of Edinburgh, however, chuckled, and bellowed to the rest of the company: “Why do you think the Queen and I live so bloody long?” Journalists pompously like to say it is their duty to speak truth to power. In the Duke of Edinburgh, we encountered the surprising figure of power speaking truth to us. ■

A. N. Wilson’s biography of Prince Albert was published in 2009.
Commentary

Absolute Monarcho

A megalomaniac jester at the court of Queen Bess

Peter K. Andersson

Queen Elizabeth employed numerous court jesters during her long reign, but there is only one who was mentioned by Shakespeare—mentioned twice, in fact. First, in Love's Labour's Lost, when the caricature of the foreign pop Don Armado is described as “a Spaniard, that keeps here in court; / A phantasm, a Monarcho, and one that makes sport / To the prince and his book-mates”. The word “phantasm” is the key here. The Arden edition of the play explains it as denoting “not a creature of the fancy, but one full of fancies”. “Monarcho” was the name of a man who can be found in the court accounts as a jester who is given several fine items of clothing. He is there only referred to as “an Italian named Monarcho” - Italian, not Spanish. But in order to learn what manner of man Monarcho was, we need to look at the literary references to him. Shakespeare describes Don Armado as a man who is allowed to go about the court because he amuses the courtiers with his delusional self-importance. In Shakespeare’s second reference to Don Armado, it is Helen in All’s Well That Ends Well uses it of Paroles, the braggart soldier.

In the second Arden edition of Love’s Labour’s Lost, the editor Richard David remarks that Monarcho “appears to have been a crazy hanger-on to the Court, whose vaingloriousness made him a butt”. The most extensive account of an incident concerning him is found in the book entitled A brief discourse of the Spanish State, with a Dialogue annexed, intituled Philobasilus (1590), in which Monarcho meets two men from the retinue of the Spanish ambassador while walking in St Paul’s, as was the custom of the society of the time. The two Spaniards ask Monarcho whom he considers to be “sovereign of the world”, whereupon he “maintained himself to be he, and named their king to be but his vicerey for Spain”. The probable author of the book, Edward Daunce, uses this and other anecdotes to make his case for the contemptible character of the Spanish, but the incident is revealing of the man called Monarcho, since Daunce claims to have witnessed this incident himself. He refers to him as “that Bergumuco (for his fantastic humors) named Monarcho”, alluding to the Arlecchino character of the Italian commedia, which was often seen as a parody of the dialect and customs of Bergamo.

To most Elizabethan writers, this man was the epitome of “the fantastique”. Fantastic not as an adjective but a noun, used to describe a top or braggart, but with the added meaning of irrational and pompous to the point of insanity. Thomas Nashe also calls him an Italian when using his name insultingly in Have with You to Saffron Walden (1596). Nashe’s brief mention adds a further detail to his portrait — that Monarcho wore crowns on his shoes. Reginald Scot, in The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584), speaks in one chapter of the ancient Greek madman Thrasyllus, who thought that all the ships that arrived in the port were his. “The Italian, whom we called here in England, the Monarch, was possessed with the like spirit or concept.” Fleshing out this character sketch, Antony Colyner, in his book on the civil wars of France (1590), uses Monarcho as a symbol of self-importance, saying that “Monarchio the name bears a frantic Italian, well known both in Germandie and England, who imagin’d that all the kings of the Earth were his vessels”. Several chapters later, he uses Monarcho as a simile once again, and adds that he “was here in England, the gazing & pastime of children in London”.

The various references to Monarcho convey his most distinctive characteristics: that he had delusions of grandeur and believed himself to be the king of the world, or at least that he had fantastical notions of himself. It is a type of personality not uncommon in our own time, with the slight peculiarity that we now make them rulers rather than jesters. To what extent Monarcho was actually self-delusional, and how he came to be employed or maintained at the royal court to entertain Queen and her entourage with his capricious fancies, are questions to which we can now probably never supply definite answers, although Colyner’s statement that he was stared at and mocked by children in the streets of London is an intriguing hint that he was originally something of a village idiot. His renown both in Germany and England suggests, on the other hand, that he travelled from court to court. Could he simply have been a nobleman or courtier with eccentric manners? The court records do not call him a jester explicitly, but the fact that he was given extravagant dress strongly points to such a position. His traits were evidently so marked, and so widely renowned, that his name became a byword for a type of individual, a hurrumph, self-important madman from a Catholic country. Shakespeare might have modelled Don Armado on him, or he might simply have created the character as an illustration of the thing that Monarcho had come to symbolize.

The urge to learn more, with certainty, about such figures can seldom be satisfied. I have spent years trying to find sources relating to the dwarfs in Velázquez’s amusing court portraits, the jesters cropping up in royal household accounts as recipients of flamboyant costumes, and the many fools and idiots mentioned in passing by well-known authors from the Renaissance up until the Georgian period. The fools can hardly speak for themselves — not so much as a whisper, or even a signature on a document. The tantalizing cameos in courtiers’ memoirs prove to be generally more elusive than revealing. It is like trying to prove that an amusing incident from a sixteenth-century jestbook actually happened. Queen Elizabeth allegedly employed several jesters, including the female Thomasina. Her father’s famous fool was Will Somer, who crops up in numerous books and plays after his death, but of whose real personality we still know barely anything. John Southworth, who devotes an entire chapter to him in his book about English jesters, cannot quite convince his readers whether he was a natural fool, a simpleton, or an artificial fool — a man who merely pretended to be stupid but who was actually shrewd and witty.

Natural fools are, above all, completely devoid of voices in the historical sources. To try to trace them is to illustrate the fundamentally impersonal and imaginary pursuit that history is. But could Monarcho be an exception? No other court jester was mentioned twice by Shakespeare, and the wealth of other allusions in writers contemporary with him is striking. On the other hand, most people

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who mention him place him in the past. By the time his reputation was spread, he was already dead. Scott, D'.Arcy, Nash and Colyns all speak of him in the past tense. Colyns says he existed “of late years.” We need to go a bit further back in time to find the one witness who speaks more extensively and knowledgeably about him. And here we suddenly receive more keys to his strange personality.

Thomas Churchyard was one of the more colporteur poets of the Elizabethan era, working periodically as a soldier of fortune and as a servant to various prominent noblemen. His poems are often autobiographical and brought him some fame in his lifetime, although he has been neglected in modern times. Only recently has interest in him been revived, resulting not least in Matthew Woodcock’s recent biography, the first ever. Churchyard was in the service of the Earl of Oxford, one of the Queen’s closest courtiers, in the 1560s, and in the 1570s, having left his military career behind him, he was reputedly engaged to devise pages for the Queen. He was evidently in a position to observe and gain knowledge of the life of the court at this time, and, in his collection of verses Churchyard’s Chance (1586), he includes a poem with the title “The Remonstratle Monarch。“

This is presumably occasioned by Monarch’s recent demise - the livery warrants him to the court accounts cease around 1575. The tone of Churchyard’s poem is mock-heroic, but it contains enough empathy to suggest that it should not be read entirely Ironically. He begins in high style:

Though Dant be decked, and Maerots lies in grace,
And Petaraks smothe, bee mounted past our west:
Yet some do lie flee, (that Poems humours haue.)
To kepe old course, with vains of verses newe.
Whose penes are prest, to paint out people plaine,
That els a sleep, in silence should remaine.
Come, poore old man, that beare the Monarke name.
Thyne Epitaph, shall here set forth thy fame.

Lamenting the demise of the poet, in the past - Dante, Petrarca and Clément Marot, the French court poet - the speaker plucks up the energy to follow in their footsteps and pay tribute to a man who would otherwise have been “kept in silence.” Is the speaker afraid that Monarch’s memory will fade? It would probably be a mistake here to read the word “plain” in the sense of unembellished or simple, but it is supposed to the other meaning of requiring or furnished (now obsolete, but common at the time), but the following lines expound on this: Thy clining minde, aspired beyond the stars,
Thy loftie stile, no yeartly stile bore.
Thy wins weare, to see through wars and waine,
Thy taunting tong, was pleasant sharpe and sore.

Here we recognize the Monarch of the other remoniscences. A mind that aspired beyond the stars, that would hold no earthly title, and that was oblivious to matters of war and peace, but also evidently a “taunting tongue.” This last attribute was of course the most required quality in a court jester, the ability to make clever jesters and to exchange barbs. The artificial fools would have set their own ways of thinking, relying on stock jokes or common and formulaic to come up with smart or challenging combats on the spot. But for natural fools the expectations were different. If Monarch was too much of a fool, his quality would have lain in his ability to utter unexpected or nonsensical statements, perhaps even rude or forthright ones that had not been accepted if pronounced by anyone else. But was Monarch a natural fool?

And though thy Pride, and pompe was somewhat vain,
The Monarch had a, deep discouraying brain:
Alone with freend, he could of wonders treat.
In publique place, pronounce a sentence great.
No matche for fooles, if wisemen were in place.
No mass at meale, to sit with common sort.
Here the speake introduces the notion that Monarch had a “deep discouraying brain,” but there is an incredulous tone throughout. He could speak of “wonders” and pronounce great sentences, but are we to understand that he was intelligent or simply that what he said was wondrous and bombastic? And how should we read the next line? Is this a fool who believed his rightful place was with the learned and intelligent, in the same way that he would not sit with commoners at the dinner table?

The next lines give a description of his appearance:
Bothe grace of looks, and fathertike face,
Of Judgement quicke, of comely forme and port.
Moste bent to words, on tyde and solene days,
Of diet fine, and damrie dierse waies.
And well disposed, if Privee old pleasure take,
At any mirth, that he poore man could make.

On gallant rob’s, his greatest glory stood,
Yet garments bare, could never daunt his minde.

Here is another allusion to his flamboyant dress, which was surely designed to accompany his infamous self-regard and pomposity, but other details in this description bring us closer to the man. Churchyard mentions his “grace looks” and “fatherlike face,” and suddenly a very real image of a very real man emerges. It evokes the weakened face of the Italian jester Gonnella, in a fifteenth-century portrait by Fouquet, or even one of Rembrandt’s pensive old men. Somehow an advanced age adds a melancholy touch to our picture of him, especially when we imagine how princes took pleasure in “any mirth that he ... could make.”

Apparently Monarch accepted his position as a jester, and did what he was instructed to do, even though he was under some delusion that he was sovereign to all around him. I begin to think that this “delusion” was the act that played both to amuse his employers and to keep a distance when his surroundings laughted at him. A sort of crazy technique to keep sane in the midst of it all.

He heard no state, nor cared for worldly good.
He debe ey thyng light, as fethers in the wind.
And still he staid, the stately thursts weak to wall,
When swords borne swere, the Monarke should have all.

A portrait of Sebastián de Morra by Diego Velázquez c.1644

The man of might, at length shall Monarke bee,
And greatest strength, shall make the feelele frawe.
Monarke, Monarke, as a man of worth and courage. Perhaps he knew that in his position he did not need to fear anyone, or even that the quality he was admired for impelled him not to fear anything about him. As long as he considered himself everybody’s superior, no one could touch him, or hurt him. But Churchyard’s enigmatic claim that he held “each thing light, as feathers in the wind” hints at some sort of vulnerability. A man who needs to keep pain at arm’s length cannot afford to care too much about anything, and must hold onto possessions, acquaintances or beliefs with a very light grip. And then we are served with what claims to be a quotation from the man himself: “The strong thursts weak to wall ...” This adaptation of a proverbial phrase might be read in various ways but, taken with the line that follows as being part of the same quotation (so that he speaks of himself punningly in the third person), it possibly gives us a style of how Monarch could speak when he was in good form. Perhaps on those “high and solemn days” of his; it suggests how ardent and heated his fantasies could become.

Richard David calls Churchyard’s epigram “tedious” - I think it is more of an oblique representation of the man, and by doing so captures something of the inherent contradiction of the jester’s lot. In the final stanzas, this paradox is brought home:

When straungers came, in presence any where,
Strange was the talke, the Monarke uttered them:
He had a voice, could thunder through your ear,
And spake most like a merrie Christian man.

But sure small mirrour, his matter harped on,
His forme of life, who lifteth to like upon:
Did see some whee, though footile fellie he wil,
Then was he, yet Monarke the lauch.

His talk was surely nonsense, in spite of his booming voice, reminiscent of one of the Tudor Christens lords, which we here see as similar in character to that of the court jester. There is also here a hint that Monarch lost favour with the court, but continued with his trades - perhaps now “the gazing and pastime of children” - and that he had to lead a life in spite of the fact that “fally fed his will.” Then, in the last line, Churchyard makes a subtle but sharp point, remarking that the grand delusions Monarch suffered from outlived him, and that perhaps they wish they did not. Monarch’s views on war and politics were hardly merciful or moderate, and they wouldn’t be in a megapolitanic, but it does Churchyard much credit that he manages to extract sympathy from this picture. One may liken it to one of Velázquez’s portraits, perhaps the one of the developmentally challenged Calabuzas wringing his hands, of the court dwarf Sebastián de Morra sitting on the floor while staring intently, almost aggressively, at the spectator. Here the jester’s personality is presented both frankly and with ainge of understanding.

Monarch’s comes across as aggressive and offensive, as he was expected to be; but the aggression and arrogance can also be read as a self-conscious strategy, his only means of survival in a world of modernity. What would a meeting with Monarch have inspired - antagonism or sympathy? I remember once listening to a very impassioned old lady lecturing to a group of Speakers’ Corner. What she said was the epitome of irreprehensible intolerance and prejudice, and yet the apparition of her diminutive figure among the broad-shouldered, street tough hecklers instinctively aroused my sympathy. And the old lady’s account of her was one of amusement and even scornful laughter. No thinking person would agree with what she said, and she had put herself in her own position, when I reject on principle. I remember that old woman. There is sometimes a very fine line between disrespectful ridicule and putting an idiot in the seat of power. But we probably prefer it when the tyrant becomes a fool to when the fool becomes a tyrant.
Getting the measure

The character and development of the Arden Shakespeare

EMMA SMITH

COMPLETE WORKS

SHAKESPEARE

Edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan and H. R. Woudhuysen

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

SHAKESPEARE

Edited by R. A. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson

In a taut exchange, in the prison at the heart of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, Isabella and her brother discuss the terrible bargain offered by the deputy Angelo: her virginity in exchange for Claudio’s life. The Folio of 1623 describes Angelo’s terms in four lines with an unfamiliar word—“prenzee.”

Claudio: The prenzie, Angelo?
Isabella: Oh, ‘tis the cunning Liverie of hell
He designed to bind thee, to invest, and cover
In prenzie garments.

That unexplained word “prenzie” is a microrosom for changing attitudes to the work of the Shakespearean plays. For Angelo, prominent in the play’s second act, to “prenzie,” it has undergone many further mutations: “prenzi,” “phrenzied,” “pious,” “proxy,” “peregrine” or “pounce”—all have had their adherents. A letter to the TLS in December 1949 suggested that “prenzie Patron,” from fencing, meaning “cover yourself,” might be relevant: useful as this may be, it is a pity that its author, the contracopean critic, Marian Stoppard, did not comment on a play that turns on an unplanned pregnancy.

For the first Arden series, which was published between 1899 and 1924, H. C. Hart printed “prenzi,” glossing it as “probably connected with purs, too nice,” and citing “ancient Scottish ‘prenze’.” J. W. Lever’s edition of the play for the second Arden series (1951-52), first published in 1956, followed the conjecture of the German Romantic poet, translator and critic Ludwig Tieck. Lever thus rendered “prenzie” to “prentizi”—an echo of the earlier description “Lord Angelo is precise.” More than fifty years later, the inventive lexical energy that supplied so many possible explanations has disappeared. The new Arden 3 edition—the volume which completes the series begun in 1995—edited by A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson, takes a non-interventionist editorial line. Retaining the Folio’s “prenzie,” the short note suggests “it must refer to Angelo’s appearance, which [Isabella] finds deceptive,” but offers no extended conjecture or objection.

Editorial attitudes here are strongly shadowed by the play’s own dramaturgy of restraint and freedom. The Duke blames the city’s moral fealty on its own shackles of the “needful bits of carabiners to headstrong weeds.” In his therapy session with Friar Thomas, he acknowledges that “doctor” is all “shrewdness,” and explains Angelo’s appointment as his deputy. Angelo will “stir up home,” loosen Vienna’s own “tied-up justice.” Angelo’s moral and textual certainty casts it as the absolutist Angelo, full of “stricture and firm abstinence,” to Arden’s hands-off lenient Duke who “would eat mutton on Fridays.” Moreover, in the latest Arden series, the Pyrrhic word of

Claudio and Isabella (detail) by William Holman Hunt, 1850

showing his characteristic combination of sophistication and clarity, Watson offers a model of lucid critical coverage and adjudication. He establishes substitution—“the triumph of exchangeability over individuality” as the play’s leitmotif, tracing its occurrences at the level of the sentence and the scene, and proposing its “indifference about the unique personhood of bodies in either sex or death” as its particular take on the generic compound of tragically. For Watson, the play’s divergent generic affinities turn on the “need to promote but regulate sexual reproduction,” perhaps shaped by the depredations of the terrible plague year of 1603 in which one in five Londoners died. His is a play more about temporal than spiritual authority, although he admits it can be read as “the work of a playwright with Catholic leanings.” He has a sneaking sympathy with the Duke’s energetic direction of the play’s final scene in unctuous comedy, and quietly revises the recent critical and theatrical tendency to denigrate his “confident paternalism.” The edition claims a position of “enquiring textual consideration.” It is Arden’s greatest strength that it embraces this as a tautology rather than paradox.

Shakespeare editing is always posthoc, existing in the realm of retrospective survey, haunted by contentious predecessors muttering in the collation. The task of editing is usually given to more senior scholars; it takes many years to research an edition and still more to bring it to press. By the time it appears, much of the debate has moved on, and more than when the editions staged played: the play has already moved on; the edition is already incomplete. Sometimes this belatedness is more prominent. Commissioned in 1982, R. A. J. Hoggman’s Arden 2. Othello was already showing its age when it appeared in 1997. Dedicated to his wife who had “so much more in common with the gentle Desdemona,” Hoggman’s text worked hard to protect her and her thoughts from the changes that had taken place since his text was projected. When the Arden 3. Othello was issued in 2009, with a new introduction to his text in 2006, reasonably observed, writing just as “the birth of early modern race studies changed critical approaches” to the play is a site. Othello is the only play in the Arden 3 series to have been thoroughly overhauled with a new edition by a different scholar, but such lateness is an editorial feature rather than a bug.

Realism to this belatedness is a tendency to conservatism. Only one Arden 3 text made a decisive break with previous textual tradition, and in so doing provoked much nostalgia for its predecessor, edited by R. N. Jenkins and R. J. Jenkins and R. J. Jenkins and R. J. Jenkins’s “new reading.” The new edition’s three-text, two-volume Hamlet (1986) was the series’s most prominent and visible editorial innovation: Jenkins did his job so well that we felt there was nothing to do it again in the same way.” By contrast, the King Lear edited by R. A. Foakes (1997) turned its back on the fashion for separate quarto and folio texts, and prepared a new conflation edition. The Arden’s strong association with that class, and their commitment to branding despite moving through five separate publishers during the course of the series, has given them a sense of monolithic authority, but the general editors have allowed volume editors licence to present their plays as seems most appropriate to them. Numerous pages of annotations register robust editorial debates: one is T. Henry VI, edited by Edward Burzyn in 2009. The other is the course of the play, and the modernization of the names Puck/Puck/Puck/Daphne/Daphne. It is an appropriate foot to the head on

Sometimes, the Arden series has actively courted the ideology of nostalgia: nothing, perhaps, so associated the Arden 2 series with editorial conservatism than the choice of Illustrations from the 1980s. The so-called “Brotherhood of Ruralists,” a group of traditional representational artists drawing on nature and the English countryside and positioning themselves at odds with modernity and the avant-garde, effectively sidelined the urban drama in music.
of an idealized rural world. This is quite a task for Measure for Measure, Shakespeare’s nearest past at the vivid ammorality of city comedy, set in what Peter Brook called “the disgusting, stinking world of medi-
val Vienna”. There are no brothels or prisons in Ann
Ovenden’s cover illustration for Lever’s edition. The
Illustration is in two vertical halves: one, the cowled
Duke hidden and contemplative; the other, a couple
who bear some resemblance to the illustrations from
The Joy of Sex (but clothed by Laura Ashley) - presum-
ably Claudio and the pregnant Juliet - gazing tenderly
at each other in a large, walled garden with distant
trees and hills and a spirally flowering chestnut.
By contrast, Arden 3 has chosen smart, stock photo-
graphic covers of a metonymic cast, dominated by
swords, roses, handkerchiefs, crowns and other
iconic imagery. For Measure for Measure some rusted
arabesque metal work against a green background
suggests, perhaps, the locked gates of the convent,
or the “little door” of Angelo’s garden, or even the
bedstead “that longing has been sick for” to which
Isabella refers in her interview with Angelo.
The abstraction is at odds with Watson’s richly human
framing of the play, in which he argues strongly for
the relevance of considering “the implied personali-
ties of the play’s characters”, and organizes his intro-
duction around dramatic biographies that are some-
times daringly literal: “this Duke is only human”.

Even as they look backwards, editions need to
promise decent shelf-life, in part by disavowing
claims to topicality that date quickly. Lever’s Measure
for Measure went to press amid student demonstra-
tions against the Vietnam War, in the immediate
aftermath of Betty Friedan’s book The Feminine
Mystique, and as the UK parliament voted to abolish
the death penalty for murder. All these might - per-
haps should - affect readings of Measure for Measure,
but the edition bears no obvious trace of its own
moment, except perhaps in Lever’s observation that
“twentieth-century taste, in art as in life, becomes
the discordant and the extreme, but is insensitive to
the virtues of the mean”. Lever’s Isabella had clearly
never caught Friedan’s whispered question “Is this
all?”, still less passed it on to Mariana, or if she had,
the answer was a reassuring affirmative. Lever is
confident that for Shakespeare, “consecrated mar-
riage signifies not only the ‘happy ending’ to a play
but the gateway to man’s fulfillment of his primary
function in the natural world”. Isabella’s “strongly
sexed ardour and impetuousity” means that marriage
to the Duke, “the representative of true secular and
spiritual authority” is “her true destiny”. In almost
his only acknowledgment of staging in the notes,
Lever confirms this happy choreography with a
hypothesized “processional exit in pairs ... led by
the Duke and Isabella ... with Lucio under guard bring-
ing up the rear”.

Such certainties are, happily, unavailable to the
twenty-first-century editor. Some of Watson’s intro-
duction is explicitly presentist: “currently (2010),
concerns about sexual harassment by powerful men
are at the forefront of public discourse”, and that
high-stakes context gives his section “Consent” its
particular piquancy and, perhaps, its particular eva-
siveness. Watson observes here that the play is also
concerned with male consent - Barradine’s refusal
to be executed, for instance - and argues that “how-
ever essential a binary in twenty-first-century sexual
mores, [consent exists in degrees and contexts] in
the play. Angelo’s complaint “who will believe thee,
Isabel?” when she threatens to reveal his monstrous
bargain may have given the play a topical resonance
with the #MeToo movement, but the play’s own sym-
pathies are ultimately slippery. Braumuller and
Watson’s edition makes excellent use of recent per-
formance history to scope out some of the possibil-
ities for Isabella of the Duke’s unanswered marriage
proposal at the end of the play, from cheerful assent
to articulated revulsion to comprised resignation.
For an edition alert to recent scholarship, however,
its conclusion on these possibilities is surprisingly
rose-tinted, suggesting sentimentally that the Duke
and Isabella are “two people who (to their own sur-
prise) have found themselves partners worthy of
their virtues” and musing that “perhaps too much is
made of Isabella’s silence”.

The new edition stresses the unresolved ending as
ostinative of the play’s uneasy inscriptions of gen-
der, power and consent. It is also the one aspect of
the play’s interpretation that could benefit from
recent work suggesting Middleton as a reviser of the
play. Arden 3 is largely unmoved by, even uninter-
ested in, such claims about Middleton’s involvement,
allowing them only as an “intriguing hypothesis”,
briefly treated in the “Note on the Text” in an appen-
dix (Lever’s version of textual material takes the first
twenty dry pages of his edition, to establish that the
underlying copy is “Shakespeare’s own rough draft,
in reasonably good condition”). Watson does, how-
ever, acknowledge, cautiously, that the Duke’s
phrase “But filter time to that” is never used else-
where by Shakespeare but does occur five times in
Middleton’s writing. Middleton’s possible presence
here has a material effect on what’s possible for Is-
abella. As Watson points out, “in a Shakespeare play,
it would be surprising if she didn’t accept the Duke’s proposal, since scarcely any woman, however committed to the single life, can remain unmarried at the end of a Shakespeare comedy (Olivia, Katherine and Beatrice all express their resistance and all are press-ganged). On the other hand, Middletonian heroines from Moll Cupurse to the White Queen’s Fawr resist these heteronormative marital conclusions. The contrast is a productive way to think about what was scarcely an issue at all for Lever, but has become the play’s most prominent question for modern readers and audiences: does Isabella accept the Duke?

A guardedness around revisionist approaches to authorship in the canon has always been a keynote of Arden 3’s house style. The first hit of the new series was Jonathan Bate’s pacy Titus Andronicus (1995, revised in 2018). Countering centuries of disparagement, Bate made a strong case for the play’s intricacies, and argued that “it ought to be widely read and more frequently performed”. His edition stimulated much criticism attending to the play’s gendered and racial dynamics, its spectacular stagecraft and its sardonic take on tragic pieties. Intrinsic to this confident critical manifesto was the insistence that it was all and only Shakespeare’s: “tight structural unity suggests a single authorial hand”. The play could not be critically rehabilitated at the same time as it was acknowledged to be collaborative. Bate returned to his edition at the end of the Arden 3 cycle, by which time the play’s reputation was secured and therefore the questions about authorship could be pursued in more detail. “Wholly Shakespearean” in the first edition became “deeply Shakespearean” in the revision, with George Peele given more credit for aspects of the drama.

Despite the great shift in ideas about Shakespeare and collaboration over the past decades, registered in Bate’s two Arden 3 editions of Titus Andronicus, no Arden 3 names a co-author on its cover. Beyond the accepted Fletcher collaborations, the series has tended to be agnostic rather than diagnostic about co-authorship: Suzanne Gossett’s judicious weighing of scholarly evidence and conjecture about All’s Well that Ends Well (2008) is an example of the integrity of this stance. Arden’s own forays into apocryphal or dubiously authored plays fossilize a moment in the 1990s rather than contemporary debates. Thus its Shakespeare’s canon includes King Edward III (edited by Richard Proudfoot and Nicola Bennett, 2017) and Sir Thomas More (2010), with a title page that both captures the brilliant forensic work establishing the play text, and places editorship within a range of creative engagements with that text: originating text by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle, Censored by Edmund Tilney, Revisions co-ordinated by Hand C. Revised by Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and William Shakespeare, Edited by John Jowett. The series has completed its forty-four volumes without taking on the recent claims Arden of Faversham and The Spanish Tragedy. Most controversial of the decisions about the scope of the series, perhaps, was the decision to add Double Falsehood, an eighteenth-century play by Lewis Theobald, to the list (edited by Brian Hammond, 2010). If it is a version of the lost, collaborative “Cardenio”, as Theobald and Hammond suggest, it has hidden the original pretty effectively, and even the Arden Shakespeare imprint has been insufficient to gain Double Falsehood much traction.

The first volume of the first Arden series, Edward Dowden’s Hamlet in 1899, began with the aim of “giving a trustworthy text”. A half-century later, Una Ellis-Fermor recognized that with more scholarship came “wholesome and chastened uncertainty”. Arden 3’s General Editors Israel, uncontentiously, by proxy: “the Arden Shakespeare has been widely acknowledged as the pre-eminent Shakespeare edition”. Measure for Measure’s own generic hybridity makes this edition a fitting conclusion to the series: at once terminal, or tragic, and contingent, or comic. Arden 4, announced in 2016 and with a publication schedule projecting into the 2030s and beyond, again promises “authoritative and innovative single-volume editions of Shakespeare”.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS
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Dreams that take my breath

The reserved defiance of Charlotte Mew

ANDREW MOTION

THIS RARE SPIRIT

A Life of Charlotte Mew

JULIA COPAS

48-kpp. Faber. £25.

FOR THE PAST HALF CENTURY and more, literary critics have used the Modernists as a stick to beat the Georgians, in some respects with good reason. Whereas the Modernists said “make it new” and used their trademark formal innovations, cinematic swoops and serves, collage effects and other forms of disruption to create a distinct break with the Victorian legacy, the Georgians made only a timid challenge to their forebears (that Rupert Brooke sonnet about a lovesick swain throwing away during a Channel crossing, left-established formal practices largely undisturbed, and continued to generate poems rather than trouble some urban subjects. Over time, these differences were so widely accepted as orthodoxy that it became difficult (and certainly unfeasible) to credit the Georgians with anything except an almost ridiculous sort of literary failure. They might have thought they were sweeping away cowbells, but actually they were just rearranging the modernists. The Modernists were those who had found a way to own their present — and the future.

Then came Edward Thomas. Or rather, then Edward Thomas came back, with such force and to such an extent that the centenary of his death in 2017 was commonplace to hear poets agreeing with Ted Hughes’s judgement that he was “the father of us all.” At the same time, Walter de la Mare began to gain a less spectacular but still significant revival: his diction (including the smattering of “thee’s and “thou’s that persisted into the 1950s) being interpreted less often as proof that he was stuck in a kind of poetical permafrrost than as evidence of a quietly stubborn legs designed to demonstrate his marvelously well-tuned ear. Along with these two, there have also been increasingly frequent attempts to revive the fortunes of Charlotte Mew (1869–1928), who was never included in the Georgian anthologies but who draws on their energies, toughens and adapts them, and in the process becomes decisively her own person.

Mew has always had notable admirers — Thomas Hardy, John Masefield and Siegfried Sassoon in her own lifetime, and other poets and writers since then, including her biographer and editor Val Warner (whose first version of the Collected Poems and Prose came out in 1980 and her first major biographer Penelope Fitzgerald (Charlotte Mew and Her Friends) was published in 1994. But despite these appropriations she’s remained something of a poet’s poet — recently asserted in Larkin’s Oxford anthology (by five poems including her masterpiece, “The Farmer’s Bride”), cleverly discussed in Angela Leighton’s excellent critical books, but more often passed over or sidelined in ways that inevitably seem patronising.

With luck and (Mew’s life was in many ways a history of distinctly bad luck) Julia Copas’s fine new Life will bring Mew the larger audience she deserves, and also further undermine the notion that the Georgians and the Modernists were incapable of meeting at some points in a common effort of transformation. The balance of Copas’s book, which follows a selection of Mew’s poetry and prose that she published last year (TLS, June 26, 2020), is well suited to this joint endeavour: it pays affectionate attention to Mew herself, and its similarly generous in its descriptions of her context. So is its tone. Copas thinks rigorously but she writes quietly, in what feels like a sustained act of sympathy with Mew’s fascinatingly withdrawn personality and the sadness that in many ways defined it.

The final effect of this biography, which frequently has a novelistic intensity (no wonder Mew appealed so much to Fitzgerald), is to remind us that great sadness can often assume a misleadingly modest aspect. That is to say: Mew’s life involved very little travel (she was firmly rooted in Bloomsbury for most of her fifty-eight years, while making occasional holiday visits to northern France), she never went to university, she remained unmarried (Copas presents her as a passionate celibate à la Emily Brontë, rather than the repressed and disappointed lesbian who appears in Fitzgerald’s pages), she was never employed outside the house (but worked exhaustingly within it) and she spent her entire existence in the shadows of death and hereditary mental illness: three of her siblings died young, and two more were confined in asylums with what would now call schizophrenia. (Mew speaks directly about this in several poems: “Kem”, “On the Asylum Road” and “In Nunhead Cemetery”). In 1928, shortly after the death of her beloved sister Anne, which swiftly followed the demise of her long-lived mother, she took her own life by drinking Lysol disinfectant — a tragically frequent form of suicide at the time (Copas tells us that 361 people in Britain had killed themselves by the same means in the previous year), and an excruciatingly painful one.

Mew was a tiny person (less than five foot tall), dressed quaintly, and generally gave the impression of being blown along by the rough winds of life. But given the amount of suffering she endured, always with a kind of stoical pragmatism, it is obvious that one of her most remarkable qualities was strength of will. She was not an intellectual, she disliked speaking about the aims and intentions of her writing, and she was inclined to resist editorial interventions made by third parties. That said, and perhaps not surprisingly in view of the pressures at home, where her architect father’s fading commercial fortunes added to the other kinds of distress, it took her a while to find her voice. Initially she tried fiction, in which Copas highlights a theme of isolation that would find its most telling expression in her poems. At the same time, Copas shows that Mew, despite her natural reticence, was also resourcefully engaged with the evolving spirit of her age: her first story was published in 1894 in The Yellow Book.

The same mixture of reserve and defiance distinguished her poems: “The Farmer’s Bride” — the title poem of her first collection, published by the Poetry Bookshop in 1896, and still her most famous — dramatically proves the point. Its narrative of flight and imprisonment is delivered in an amiable West Country accent that nevertheless includes breathless exclamation, and its agitated personal psychology is fused with unspoken sympathy for suffrage ideals of female empowerment. Equally remarkable, and in a way that anticipates the greatest stylistic achievement in the poems she was still to write, “The Farmer’s Bride” takes all sorts of formal risks — it dishevels its initial stanzaic patterns, and explores the effects created by the use of different line-lengths, so as to generate a constant feeling of unpredictability: an acoustic anxiety that dramatises the mood of the “poor maid” who “sleeps up in the attic there”.

Mew’s most ambitious use of these techniques occurs in her longest poem, “Madeleine in Church” (which is also notable for its impatient dismissal of religion as a potential source of comfort: “I’d rather kneel over there, in open day / Where Christ is hanging, rather pray / To something more like my own clay”). But its benefits to her poems exist everywhere, serving a purpose akin to that of Hopkins’s sprung rhythm (without the same density of language). Namely, the purpose of guaranteeing that Mew’s poems, for all their artful compressions and disyllables, slow down to the rhythms of a speaking voice — one that sometimes stammers, rushes, darts and quirks and at others rolls, rambles, swaggers and strolls. “Can I believe there is a heaven or world than this? / And if there is / Will the strange heart of any everlasting thing / Bring me these dreams that take my breath away” (from “In the Hermit’s Cell”).

Although Julia Copas understands how this style reflects the more fastidious aspects of Mew’s personality — because its effects are so good at creating a sense of advance and retreat — she is equally good as presenting Mew in company: in and around the Poetry Bookshop, among female friends and supporters such as Mrs Dawson Smith, May Sinclair and Alda Monro, and with the enlightened men who spoke up for her, Sydney Cockerell chief among them. It means, among other things, that her book has a very appealing sense of amplitude, as well as apt concentration on its primary subject. It also means that she convinces us to see Mew as a person who combined two (at least two) personalities in one: shy as well as bold, retiring as well as assertive, fidgety as well as firm, high-minded as well as sensuous: “What are we as the spirit afterwards, but first the touch”. It’s a blend that raises a starting question: did Mew’s dualities amount to a well-controlled and socialized form of the distress that led two of her siblings into confinement? She certainly wrote in full knowledge of her family’s vulnerability, and the pathos of her story, as well as the characteristic tone and focus of her poetry, cannot easily be separated from the anxiety that this provoked in her. —

Given the amount of suffering Mew endured, always with a kind of stoical pragmatism, it is obvious that one of her most remarkable qualities was strength of will.

Andrew Motion’s most recent collection of poems is Randomly Moving Particles, 2020

"If the weather you’re in is a bit of a downer, you’d want to put on a bit of a smile. It’s like a bit of a lift in the crowd. It’s a bit of a bit of a bug."
Naturalism and nationalism

The reception of Arthur Streeton, past and present

DAVID HANSEN

STREETON
WAYNE TUNNICLIFE, EDITOR

400pp. Art Gallery of New South Wales. £33.75.

A rthur Streeton has had a pretty good run since his National Gallery of Victoria retrospective in 1995. The intervening years have seen fewer than four public exhibitions treating particular aspects of his work: Arthur Streeton: The art of war (National Gallery of Australia, 2017), and Arthur Streeton: The art of war (National Gallery of Australia, 2017). As a member of the “Heidelberg School” quadrumvirate (with Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin), he was a substantial presence in the NGV’s Australian Impressionism (2007) and the more recent London exhibition Australia’s Impressionists (2016). The artist made a triumphant solo return over the Australian summer, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales’s post-Covid reopening exhibition, a comprehensive array of 141 works (plus half a dozen portraits and a couple of photographs by other artists). It is documented in an equally substantial catalogue, simply titled, like the exhibition, Streeton. There is no need to say more. Streeton is, as the weight of the catalogue suggests, a premium cultural brand, one firmly established through the artist’s self-promotion and cannily self-promotion: from the Streeton’s Sydney Sunshine exhibition of 1896 to Arthur Streeton’s Venice (1909) to Streeton’s Show of the Sunlit Suburbs of Sydney (1922). It has been sustained both by Australian settler art history’s constant reiteration of its foundational myths, and by a persistent popular taste for “blue and gold” pastoral landscape painting.

Essays by the exhibition curators Wayne Tunnicliffe and Denise Mimmocchi, as well as by Jane Clark and Allison Goudie, document clearly his first decennium miraculis. A key figure in Melbourne’s 1880s avant-garde, Streeton had an innate poetic sensibility that was early attached to the perceptual disciplines of Naturalism and Aestheticism which Tom Roberts had brought back to the colonies from London. Both in his Yarra Valley pastorals of 1888-90 and in subsequent harbour views of Sydney, Streeton demonstrates an instinctive, natural painterliness: broad slabs of earth, sea and sky are rendered with a loaded, square-ended brush, while (as Fred Williams observed to the art critic Patrick McCaughney), the calligraphic flicks and dabs of herbage and rippling wavelets in the foreground “tug the picture down and give it its tension”.

Certainly the freshness and quality of Streeton’s vision were quickly recognized by his contemporaries, with the Sydney gallery acquiring “Still glasses, the stream and shall forever glide” (1889) when he was only twenty-three, and with “Golden Summer, Eaglemont” (1889) shown to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon in 1891 and 1892. Having established a market and reputation in both major colonial capitals, Streeton decided to follow many of his local peers to Europe. En route he spent two months in Egypt; he finally arrived in London in May 1897.

As Anne Gray shows, his first few years in the city were a time of poverty and loneliness. In addition to his initial, disabling encounters in the flesh with “Constable Turner Titian Watts & all the masters”, Streeton struggled to find the right pictorial accent for his new geographical and professional setting: foliage and clouds grew clumped, tree lower, palette more glaucous, surfaces more aligned with the mannerisms of the Edwardians Philip Wilson Steer, ArnsheyBrown and David Murray. Gray notes the colonial gesticulations, too: just a year after Australian Federation, we see Streeton painting the two “footsy, legsy” pictures of Trafalgar Square, one entitled “The centre of the Empire”. However, with the encouragement (and useful contacts) of his new love, the Canadian violinist Nora Glench, he began to make some headway, and when he visited Australia in 1907, he took 160 pictures to sell. Three successful exhibitions that year made enough money to enable him to marry Nora, and encourage him in what would become a regular pattern of sabbatical return, to sell European subjects to Australian patrons, as well as to paint (and sell) more local ones.

After the First World War (during which he had obtained a commission as a war artist), Streeton’s domination of Australian painting became almost absolute. His pre-eminence was sustained and enhanced by conservative friends and supporters, artists and critics whose attitudes reflected the views of Australia’s landed “patrician”, those pastoral capitalists whose possessions and positions are celebrated in works such as “The Land of the Golden Fleece” (1926), J. S. MacDonald, painter, critic and Director of successfully the Sydney and Melbourne galleries, famously described Streeton’s paintings as “pointing to the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of felonies”, continuing with the unfortunate declaration (this was the 1930s) that “If we choose we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility”. Another friend and colleague, Lionel Lindsay, who described Streeton as “our national painter” as early as 1919, later published a hysterical, anti-semitic diatribe against the “putrid meat” of modernism, which he decreed as a conspiracy of Jewish dealers, critics and collectors, Aided Art (1942).

Tunnicliffe has to concede that “the conservative cultural commentary that grew up around these paintings can now seem uncomfortably nationalistic”. Such nationalism is actually at the heart of what we might call the Streeton Paradox. The “Heidelberg School” made (well summarised here by Goudie and Clark) is described in contemporary sources as Impressionism, or Modern Art. However, it can be clearly identified as a variant of the Naturalism that flourished in France in the 1870s and 80s. As one critic observed, referring to the movement’s leading proponent: “The whole world paints so much today like M. Bastien-Lepage seems to paint like the whole world”. Indeed, we find such plein-air, bucolic realism all over the place; it spread around the globe as rapidly as those other 1870s inventions the telegraph, the phonograph, the lightbulb and the cash register. In France, in addition to Bastien-Lepage there were also Pascual Dagnan-Bouveret and Jean-François Raffaelli, in the UK the Newlyn School and the Glasgow Boys, in Italy the Macchiaioli, in Sweden Anders Zorn and Georg Pauli, and in America William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam. Naturalism’s stylised tropes were scattered as far afield as Canada (William Brymner), Brazil (Eliéser Viécourt) and even Japan (Tokuda Seki), not to mention the Australian colonies.

Yet the strange truth is that this first truly global art movement becomes in each of its several localisations the very language of localism, of individualism, perhaps even of racism: in Streeton, a presumptuous, germinal-sentimental celebration of settlement of the trees, grasses, flowers and cedars of Box Hill and Heidelberg, of the cyan, ultramarine...
Notes on a winter journey
Reflections on Schubert's masterly song cycle

MARK GLANVILLE

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO SCHUBERT'S WINTERREISE
MARJORIE W. HIRSCH AND LISA FEURZEIG, EDITORS

SCHUBERT'S WINTERREISE, widely regarded as the greatest classical song cycle, is not short of literary comment. In mushrooming, its growth has been so lush and thriving that it is now a staple feature of the repertoire, appearing regularly in concert and recital. Its popularity has been fuelled by a combination of factors: the cycle's musical and poetic beauty, its emotional depth, and its accessibility to a wide range of audiences. The cycle's expansive programme—spanning the six months of winter, from the first snowflakes to the final frost—has been interpreted in countless ways, each with its own unique perspective.

In his essay, "Nature and Science in Winterreise", one of the more successful in addressing his themes, establishing links between Schubert's work and the field of scientific research, the writer notes that "The cycle is not just a programme of the seasons, but an exploration of the mind's response to the changing world. It is a journey through the landscape of the soul, a journey of the imagination."

James William Sobieszek's essay, "Identification in Die schöne Müllerin and Winterreise", is certainly not irrelevant: "Today, some aspects of these stories seem senseless", he claims. "Who abandons family, friends, community, connections, and job for utter uncertainty? Who acts without a script or a map?" Sobieszek's tone is as gripping as his interpretation is literal. "All of us can recall being anxious and curious about the future like the journeyman in Die schöne Müllerin", he concludes. "These masterpieces may be interpreted as entreaties to beholders and empathetic human beings. Within today's turbulent world and dimming future, such sensitivity seems in short supply".

The cycle's universal appeal is further demonstrated in the wider sphere of the arts. Schubert's music has been adapted for film, stage, and opera, with Winterreise serving as a major inspiration for many modern interpretations. The cycle's themes of isolation, loss, and redemption continue to resonate with audiences across generations.

In conclusion, Schubert's WINTERREISE remains a masterpiece of the Romantic era, a work that continues to touch the hearts of musicians and listeners alike. Its enduring appeal is a testament to the power of music to move and inspire, to evoke emotions and ideas that transcend time and place. As long as there are ears to hear and hearts to feel, Winterreise will continue to be a source of wonder and delight.
Red ink and machetes
Ethnic strife on a Rwandan hilltop

LINDSEY HILSUM

OUR LADY OF THE NILE
SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA
Translated by Melanie Maithner

Novels about girls’ boarding schools are often light-hearted and written for younger audiences — think of Enid Blyton’s Malory Towers or Eleanor M. Brent-Dyer’s Chalet School. The tycle in Our Lady of the Nile (Notre Dame du Nil, 2012) is an altogether more sinister place. While Brent-Dyer moved her fictional school from the Austrian Alps to Guernsey to avoid the Nazis, Scholastique Mukasonga’s establishment, located high up in the misty hills of Rwanda, cannot escape the vicious ethnic politics of the country in the early 1990s.

Rwanda was colonized by Belgium, which initially favoured the country’s minority Tutsi people, but later privileged the majority Hutus, planting the seeds of the ethnic strife that culminated in the genocide of 1994. Mukasonga — a Rwandan who lives in France — lost seventeen family members in the massacres. She places her Catholic tycle, which is staffed largely by Belgian nuns, near the source of the Nile — or rather a source of the Nile, as white men “discovered” multiple sources in central Africa — next to a statue of the Virgin Mary. “It was Monsignor the Vicar Apostolic who decided to erect the statue, in order to consecrate the Nile to the Virgin Mary, despite the King of Belgium persuading the sovereign Portillo to consecrate the whole country to Christ the King”, writes Mukasonga, in the sly, satirical tone that characterizes the early chapters of the novel, deftly captured by Melanie Maithner’s translation. The tycle carries particular resonance in Rwanda, as the Belgians decided that the Tutsis were too tall and elegant to be truly African, and must have arrived down the river from Egypt at some unspecified date in history. The distinction between Tutsi and Hutu was — and is — in reality quite subtle, and largely social, but in the early twentieth century the Belgians imported European racial theories, which included distinguishing administrators to measure Rwandans’ noses to “determine” who was a Tutsi (long nose) and who a Hutu (short nose).

Mukasonga parodies this to great effect through the character of Monsieur de Fontenelle, a Belgian coffee planter living next door to the tycle, who builds a temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis, in front of which he insists on photographing Tutsi girls from the tycle swathed in what he fondly regards as Egyptian robes. This is not only sexually suspect but also draws dangerous attention to the few Tutsi girls permitted to attend the school, “which was training the country’s future female elite while at the same time deploring Christianity and democracy”. One day Gloriosa, an odious Hutu girl whose father is a government minister, and Veronica, a Tutsi, find faded photographs of the 1852 ceremony to consecrate the statue of the Virgin. Gloriosa, delighted to see that the faces of several Tutsi dignitaries have been crossed out in red ink, laughs: “A dash of ink, a slash of machete, that’s all it takes to Tutsi them... And no other way...” Not their order, we clearly see, is no haven. “Veronika wondered when she, too, would be crossed out with red ink, on the annual class photo taken at the start of the school year.”

Mukasonga is at her strongest when showing the two worlds the girls must navigate. At home they have boyfriends on motorbikes while at school they are meant to be virgins (despite the requisite dodgy priest who likes to see them undress). These kinds of disparities will be familiar to many teenage girls around the world, but the different tastes the girls experience point to another, wider cultural divide — at home they eat delicacies like ibihisene (sugarcane), red gahungu sweet potatoes, avocados and extra-salty, red roasted peanuts, while at school they survive off a bland European diet of corned beef, sardines in oil, jam and Kraft cheese. The nuns and priests impose their Catholic beliefs and rituals, but these are no more valid or true than the world of the amabatwa, the spirits of the dead, and of Rubanga, the witch doctor, who scoffs, “What do the whites understand of our secrets?” In the tycle the girls worry about failing exams; in their other lives they fear the abarezi, the poisoners, who are always busy.

Mukasonga hunches from force — during an account of a visit from the Queen of Belgium; in an attempt to shorten the Tutsi girls’ hair; to a darker tone, as the novel progresses towards its violent denouement. Gloriosa becomes more powerful and the Tutsi girls more terrified as the nuns give up resisting the horrors of the world beyond the tycle walls. “We’re so close to heaven”, says the Mother Superior at the beginning of the book, casting her eyes upwards from the cloud-covered hilltop. By the end they are very close to hell.

Mainly just people
The tale of a friendship between a bullied boy and a Traveller

CLAIRE KOHDA HAZELTON

COMMON GROUND
NAOMI ISHIUGO
432pp. Tinder. £16.99

Naomi Ishiguro’s debut, Escape Routes (2020), was a collection of playful stories infused with magic and grounded in the everyday. Angela Carter and Neil Gaiman seemed to be clear influences. The stories, populated with wizards, rat catchers and a cerebral teddy bear, felt written by kids but also precisely for grown-ups.

Common Ground is Ishiguro’s first novel, it begins in 2003 in a town in Surrey, and focuses on the friendship between the thirteen-year-old Stan, who is being bullied at his new private school, and Charlie, a sixteen-year-old boy from a Traveller community. While there is no sense of fairytale overlapping with reality, the presence of two very distinct and separate worlds is felt. Stan’s is one of opportunity and, after his initial difficulties, acceptance and family love. Charlie’s home is described as a “toxic soup” — but it is still a conventional home, recognized and considered valid by wider society. Charlie’s own life, while not as bright, is open and unembellished everywhere (Charlie describes himself as “from all over”) — and yet also nowhere. He and his people are routinely despised, assaulted and pushed out - by locals and often councils - and moved on.

At times, Ishiguro’s characters cross over the boundary separating their worlds. Stan is welcomed on to Charlie’s community’s site, and he cannot “help but feel he is confined by the relative normality of it all”. Charlie’s man’s caravan is a home like any other, with even “the same spotly tablecloth he used to make up”. It stands everywhere (Charlie describes himself as being “from all over”) — and yet also nowhere. He and his people are routinely despised, assaulted and pushed out - by locals and often councils - and moved on.

When you fuck up, you drown”. When Charlie and Stan meet as adults, in 2012, the Virgin Illinois charges Charlie up on his life — “college in Woking, Bristol for uni!” — and now he is studying for a journalism MA at UCL. “But thinking of his own experience Charlie knew he had to just be normal to make it fit.” Pushed to the margins, he recognizes that his life doesn’t match up with the “artificial stages” people from Stan’s world use to describe life.

Common Ground is a novel about perseverance. Charlie teaches Stan to “stand his ground” when confronted by his bullies; and Charlie learns to stand his ground when confronted by discrimination. Both fight with the other by their side; the common ground is their allyship. The book’s release has coincided with that of Kala and the Sun, the new novel by Ishiguro’s father, Kazuo, and this has helped it to garner far more attention than that of most other debut novels. But this doesn’t mean we should judge it too harshly. While readers may find some moments a little sentimental, the end result is genuinely moving.

Kazuo Ishiguro recently told the BBC that he fears “for the younger generation of writers” who are only writing from their own experiences, worried that an “anonymous lynch mob will turn up online and make their lives a misery”. Perhaps he was, in part, defending his daughter’s choice of subject. Naomi Ishiguro has confronted a racism from outside — her own experience, a racism that British society often ignores — “Gypsies don’t sell papers”, says the editor of a left-wing newspaper in the novel. She has done so in a manner that is sensitive and respectful, to produce a heartwarming tale of a passionate and beautiful friendship.
On auteurs pilot
A film director reflects on his creative genius

HAL JENSEN

DIARY OF A FILM
NIVEN GOVINDEN

Given the emotional and creative commitment entailed, how does an artist finish one project and start another? The answer lies in good novelistic territory. In Niven Govinden’s Diary of a Film, a director is in Italy for a festival screening of his adaptation of William Maxwell’s coming-of-age novel The Folding Lion (1945), in which the intense friendship between two teenage boys is blighted when one of them starts a relationship with a girl. Govinden’s novel follows the director and his two lead actors as they prepare for the usual round of interviews and photo-shoots, the public screening and the critical reception - all of which, after the sustained privacy of filming, feels like another intimacy forced to an end.

The film is a festival hit but the director, though pleased, is already on the trail of his next project. He befriends a woman in a cafe and develops an obsession with filming her early novel about young tragic love. The woman, initially flattered, ultimately recoils from the director’s intrusive creative appetite. While one project, ostensibly finished, begins to grow in its public life, another, just emerging, stutters to a halt. This intriguing interference focus puts Govinden’s novel in contrast to the obvious reference point of its title: Jean Cocteau’s La belle et la bête: Journal d’un film (1946), the diary in which Cocteau documented filming his classic retelling of Beauty and the Beast. Published to coincide with the film’s release, it records the daily trials and traumas arising from illness, accident, challenges of scheduling and continuity, the weather, exhaustion, costumes, the cutting process, insurance - in other words, the beating everyday ordeals that somehow resulted in a beautiful film.

Although Cocteau, in auteur mode, is happy to make declarative statements about France or cinema, his very readable journal brings everything back to the physical craft of filmmaking. That the director in Govinden’s novel lacks Cocteau’s down-to-earth priorities is most evidently signalled by the fact that each of the twelve chapters in Diary of a Film is narrated from within the director’s mind - and with not a paragraph in sight: every description, including dialogue with others, is swallowed in an uninterrupted stream of self-aggrandising prose.

Whether uttering profoundness on time and direct, or on the inevitable moral compromises of creative genius, whether acknowledging the depth and subtlety of his own emotions or counting with due humility - the number of his masterpieces, our director (“maestro”, rather) exhibits all the signs of unchecked narcissism. He hopes that his son, when older, will be proud of him, he mentions no hopes to be proud of his son. This fantasist’s self-absorption is the opposite of Cocteau’s ego as it is battles honestly with the unpoetic demands of reality.

The two lead actors, as the director tells it, fawn on him and on each other. They are models of affectation and self-regard. Like our narrator, they delight in what they perceive to be their heightened sensibilities. They express amazement at the wonderful Italian food: “How do they do that? Wow, he mouthed silently, as if recognising the greater power in explaining without words. Wow wow wow.” (I worry, though, for the masterly chef, who appears to have served pears in marsala still in their wrinkled skins.)

In fiction, as in life, it is unpleasant to be in such self-congratulatory company. It would appear that Govinden has written a perfectly executed takedown of our times, in which artistic pretension, far from blushing with shame, preens itself to wild applause. But it comes as a shock to realize that Diary of a Film is in deadly earnest. It is not just that the marketing team and blur-busters have placed it so soberly in the airy, highbrow category. On too many occasions for it to be subject to misreading, Govinden indicts the creative vanity he describes rather than exposing it to ridicule:

One of those critics, who had famously walked out of one of my films a decade earlier, was moved to tears, and pulled me aside before leaving. Your problem has always been in how you find beauty in unexpected places: the factory, the dock, inside political office, and now on this farm, he said. We are not always ready for what you find, and that has never bothered you, which frustrates us even more. That your single-mindedness is also your greatest strength, and that your consistency. I accept this now.

Had this been written by Jonathan Swift, or possibly Chris Morris, it might be classified as savage satire. But in Diary of a Film there is, tellingly, no undercurrent of anger, no evidence of using our own. Mockery can bring a reader considerable discomfort, but nothing to match the cringe brought on by delusional sincerity.

Action in theory
Ideas overwhelm in French bohemia

TANJIL RASHID

THE COMMITTED
VIET THANH NGUYEN

What does it mean for the Vietnamese-American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen to be “committed”? It could mean that he’s in a serious relationship. Or that he’s been checked into a mental health clinic. Both senses are indeed employed in Nguyen’s new novel. But his title alludes to another different kind of commitment: The Committed is the usual translation for engage, the writerly ideal promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre. Rejecting the creed of Tert-tout-Tart (having discredited Flaubert as a “talented coupon clipper”), Sartre asserted that literature must take a stand, that “words are action”. In a similar vein, Nguyen defines storytelling as “an act of justice”; his most recent op-ed for the New York Times mocked “craft”-minded authors for “writing about flowers and moons”.

Set largely in the salons of 1980s Paris, The Committed brims with Sartrean references and concludes with a note in which Nguyen affirms the influence of Sartre and his ideological bedfellows Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Frantz Fanon and others. Significantly, Nguyen also cites Theodor Adorno’s essay “Commitment” (1962), the philosopher’s response to Sartre’s esquisse of “the committed writer”. Commitment, in this sense, emerges as the main criterion by which Nguyen’s novel should be judged.

The Committed is a hybrid of narrative and theory. It continues the story of the “man of two faces” first encountered in Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Viet- nam War novel, The Sympathizer (2015). There he was called “the Captain”. He was a Cold War double agent, embedded with anti-Communist forces, leftist in conviction yet sensitive enough to the other side to pass as an anti-Communist to his colleagues and best friend. Eventually even his Viet Cong handlers were fooled; they repaid his service with torture.

In The Committed, the Captain - now exiled to Paris - becomes Vo Danh: Vietnamese for “No man”, a name that evokes the paperless, placeless flux of migrant life. Via a well-connected “Aunt” (really another Communist spy), Danh is thrust into French bohemia, peppered with characters such as “Master PhD” and “BFD” (like “BIL” - the philosopher Bernard Henri Lévy - but with a whiff of “Tsk”), the salacious economist and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn. The hypocrisy of the French intelligentsia, from its racially prejudiced anti-immigrants to its sexually exploitative feminists, is exposed, though Nguyen evidently remains devoted to their theories all the same. Adding a little grit to this ideas-driven novel, Danh becomes a drug dealer for his boho friends, and makes new ones in the Paris underground among fellow exiles.

Salon life provides the foil for Nguyen’s discourses on empire and race. Theorists are cited on every page, mostly soixante-huitards and mostly, again, Frantz Fanon and Alain Cissé, white which is odd, given Nguyen’s theme and stance. There is a crude monotony to Nguyen’s rhetoric: “colonisation is paedophilia”; colonialism “rapes and molests”; France “raped our country”, to be coloured “to be abused”. One may agree with this and still feel rather like the character who at one point says, “I don’t want to hear another lecture”.

And at the conclusion of The Committed, Nguyen - a professor at the University of Southern California - describes the book as an opportunity “to revisit many of the thinkers who have influenced me over the years”. But the end product amounts, essentially, to a series of creative footnotes, which seem designed to cater largely to a cloistered audience of the author’s peer reviewers: hardly the words of action Sartre had in mind, and much closer to the solipsistic coupon-clipping he scorned.

If there is anything here that will rouse one to action, it is the novel’s beautifully rendered prologue: three and a half pages narrating the ordeal of the so-called “boat people” who fled Vietnam by sea. The controlled, formal style here mimics the refugees’ futile efforts to maintain dignity in the grimness of circumstances (“But even eating so little, we still left our daily traces all over the deck”). The conflict Nguyen feels between craft and commitment ultimately proves false. For, in the end, it is only through convincing and well-crafted sentences that any commitment can endurably be expressed.
Sonorous jewels
200 years of Charles Baudelaire

BEVERLEY BIE BRAHIC

In this bicentenary month of the birth of the poet Charles Baudelaire, I wonder, has the sublime Les Fleurs du Mal that so scandalized nineteenth-century Paris become one of those books gathering dust on a shelf you need a chair to reach? Lines to recall as a distraction from insomnia? For Baudelaire, like Marcel Proust, an admiral, was an insomniac: “I want to sleep; I want to sleep, not live!” In a sleep that is as sweet as death is / kisses without remorse / And your burned copper body forgive,” lament, “Lette,” a poem purged from the book’s first, 1857 edition; “O Beauty, the soul’s harsh scourgè!” but also, the “caustic” Chatter. Conversation? The title is untranslatable (the translations here are mine). Professor Antoine Compagnon of the Collège de France, the author of the definitive A Summer with Montaigne, but his poems fall between two chairs: Romantic and Symbolist, or, three, if we include his Modernist experiment with the prose poem in the seminal Paris Spleen. Byron he describes, revealingly, as having “the sublime defects of the great poet: melancholy, always inseparable from a sense of beauty, and an acrid, diabolical personality”; but he faulted his elder’s loquacity; He raised Thomas de Quincey, the “English Opium-Eater” for his own extinguishable Artificial Paradises: “Whoever has had a feeling of remorse to calm, a memory to evert, a sorrow to drown, a castle in Spain to build — all in the end have invoked you, mysterious god seated in the sinews of wine.” De Quincey’s drugy digressions did not, on the other hand, please Baudelaire: he pronounced him “horrible blemison conversationaliser”: verbos. He prided the unhinheitlich Edgar Allan Poe, whose Romant he translated and burned. Baudelaire is to all intents and purposes a one-volume poet whose prose works, among them De l’Echasse de Rêve (On the Echass of Hallucination), Paris Spleen (I admire Michael Hamburger’s translation in Twenty Poets Prose), and reviews of the art scene amplify the verse. A virtuoso of form and compression, he was a perfectionist. He flattered his compatriot Victor Hugo but behind his back scorned the fecundity of the “academician in the womb.” An expurgated Les Fleurs du Mal (“All the miracles of the parenthesis who pose before words’ immortality,” Baudelaire fumed) appeared in 1880; the six offending poems appeared in Les Épaves (“The Wreckers”) in 1866, a year before Baudelaire died, aged forty-six, ill and destitute. Better to publish one chef d’oeuvre than a shelf of approximated work. And who would quarrel with him when that book, enlarged, reedited, republished, is so succinctly: passionate and coldly detaché, derivative and tender, ironic (often), wholeheated (occasionally), austere, lavish and so obsessive in its despair and desires, its quest for the unavailable?

I am fair, O mortal, as a dream of stone; And my breast, which all my lovers bate, Lives to inspire in poets a passion As mute and indestructible as matter.

I reign, unknownable as a sphinx; Keep A heart of snow and the whiteness of swans; I hate motion that displaces the lines, And I never laugh and I never weep.

Poets, before my heroic postures, Which seem borrowed from the proudest sculptures, Will consume their days in austere studies; And to fascinate each dolever I’ve pure visions that make all things fairer: My eyes, my large eyes, with their eternal clarities. “Beauty” proclaims. One thinks of Giacometti each morning destroying the previous day’s work:

Cynical about man’s nature - part angel, part beast (“ange” is masculine in French, “béte” is feminine) - Baudelaire dreams of escapes to a tropical “nature” where “with eyes closed on some warm autumn night, ... I see happier shores go rolling past / Sparkling in the sun’s monotonous light.” (“Erotic Perfection”) or, in the incantatory “Invitation to the Voyage,” to a place where all is “only order and beauty, / Voluptuousness, calm, and luxury.”

But, as with Proust later, Paris with its crowds is Baudelaire’s haunt. In Confections of an English Opium-Eater, he’s “a man completely in love.” He finds in London’s “Belle Epoque” the “ideal of enchantment” of “a New World” that his “Old Women” with their stoicism in the face of age and loneliness (“proud, spine ramrod straight ... Her marble brow looked fit for laurels.”). In his texts on laughter and the art of caricature, Baudelaire distinguishes between two types, the ephemeral and those that “contain a mysterious element, durable, eternal ... destined to show man his own moral and physical ugliness” and “fatalism.” Baudelaire in his sketches aspires to the second, but comes himself among the grotesques: “All these contortions,” he writes of Goya’s Caprichos, “all these bestial faces, these diabolical grimaces are penetrated with humanity.” And if Baudelaire’s caricatures are pitiful, he can be poignant about outskirts: the poor, the old, street artists, gypsies, and Paris’s “chillones,” rag and bone men, “mourn in the meanderings of some filthy / Stain crawling with object humanity. // A ragman will come shuffling along...,” rummaging like a poet through society’s refuse for recyclable treasure.

Perhaps Baudelaire’s most vivid, lavish-sententious, and sexual poems are the portraits of women. A catalogue of their attributes fills two pages in his essay Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne: “muslims, gauches, vain and shimmering clouds of fabric ... the metal and the mineral that encircles around her arms and her neck; three more expound on make-up or more broadly, artifice. There are poems in hair (a motif that would later tantalize Edgar Degas), the rustling of dress and undress (“She had kept only her

Portrait of Charles Baudelaire by Gustave Courbet, c.1848-49

Beverley Bie Brahic’s most recent books include The Hotel Eden and her translation of Charles Baudelaire’s Invitation to the Voyage.

Proust was to compare Baudelaire to Dostoevsky and oppose him to Hugo, who ‘never stopped talking about death, but with the detachment of a glutton’.

When you lie sleeping, my dusky beauty, / In a tomb of black marble for ever, / When your only beauty, only manner / Is a yawning hole, a roof that is leaky... Critics suggest that Baudelaire’s spleen sprang from a troubled relationship with his mother. Certainly the two years before he went to Montmartre, his father died, before he remarried, was his first lost paradise. “During my childhood there was a period of passionate love for you,” Baudelaire wrote to her, “that she hadn’t noticed the embittered poem addressed to her in Les Fleurs du Mal: I haven’t forgotten our little house, White and tranquil, though the city was close, Its plaster, porcelain and old Versailles, Hiding their naked limbs in the bushes, And the sun at evening streaming down, Knocking its rippled shade upon our pane. A big eye open in the curious sky It seemed on our silent dinners to spy, And like candlelight spread its reflections Over the rough cloth and serene curtains. If Baudelaire found relief from his melancholy, he found it in art, his own and that of the painters whose work he followed. Reflections on their canvases speak equally to his poetry; in the matter of colour, for example, defined as “la tristesse des oiseaux” as “the harmony of... the hot and the cold...” some tones are gay and playful, sad, rich and gay, rich and sad.” I think of flash of green that lights the “cold shadow” of “Autumn Song.” I love the greenish light of your long eyes, “ Gentle beauty.” Colour versus line, detail versus abstraction are problems of poetics too. His female subjects or objects align with those in the transgressive canvases of his companions Eugène Delacroix (“Femme au Perroquet,” “Femmes d’Alger”) and Edouard Manet (“Olympia,” “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe”). When Baudelaire the art critic ascribes “intimacy ... moral suffering...”, “lofty, serious melancholy” to Delacroix and calls him a painter who grasps his subjects “by the visceras,” he is talking about himself. When he reminds us in his essay on laughter that “the artist is only artist on condition that he is double”, he is talking about himself. Proust was to compare Baudelaire to Dostoevsky and oppose him to Hugo, who “never stopped talking about death, but with the detachment of a glutton.” Today readers of Dostoevskys novels are struck by the currents of asphyxial lyrics like “Correspondences”, in which “Nature is a temple” and “Our hearts are like New Year’s cards as they lie on the mantel of the middle of the night has it right?” One by heart. “Soo soar, sa ma Douleur, et tiers-tot plus tranquille” - the baseline marking time while the right hand adds grace notes to the inexorable.
Marvel-maker

The mixed legacy of Stan Lee

ROZ KAVENY

TRUE BELIEVER
The rise and fall of Stan Lee

ABRAHAM RIESMAN


During her brief career as a scriptwriter for Timely Comics - the company that later became Marvel, in the 1940s, Patrick Hightsmith was persuaded by her editor to meet, with a view to a date, the young cousin by marriage of their publisher Martin Goodman. His name was Stan Lee. A few obvious reasons, nothing came of it - probably not even Hightsmith's obsession with egocentric mythomaniacs who charm their way into acquiring anything that's not nailed down. That type is, after all, a quintessential feature of American life and in particular of American popular culture.

Lee made a substantial contribution to that culture, of course - but what was it? The official version, naturally uncomfortable now that movies and television shows based on Marvel comics are a billion-dollar Disney franchise, is that, during his tenure as Marvel's editor and principal writer in the 1950s and 1960s, Lee was the superhero's creator by giving his characters mundane problems as well as cosmic nemeses and bombastic one-liners. The Fantastic Four have abilities that prove as much a curse as a blessing, and Peter Parker has to cope with being an unpopular boy at high school as well as fighting crime as Spider-Man. Marvel also decided - and this does seem to be Lee's business sense kicking in - to set all these adventures in a single fictional universe. This means that heroes - and villains - could team up, heroes could end up fighting heroes, and so on. Readers had to buy ever more titles, and buying was going on.

Certainly Lee and his employees created a fascinating modern mythology between them - but what exactly was his role apart from being a brilliant self-publicist? There are numerous tell-all books and anecdotes of Lee's life and career, some more directly creative and generous than others, and Abraham Riesman's excellent biography ends up being aggressively agnostic as to whether Stan Lee was an Ellington, a Dali or a Disney.

Lee was born in 1922 in Manhattan, into a large Romanian-Jewish family. His lack of clear ambition as an adolescent was a source of disappointment to his parents, who got him a job at a local relative's place as something of a last resort. Comic books were hardly respectable - although they were lucrative and Goodman was not exactly scrupulous. Still, when Stan left to go into the army, Goodman kept the job open for him, and the recruits saw something in him, placing him in the Playwrights Division, where he wrote about the lives of smaller, more ordinary figures such as Frank Capra, Charles Addams and Dr. Seuss. (Riesman points to the vein of liberal US exceptionalism in Lee's work; he was a trained propagandist.)

In his personal life, Lee was a negligible son and brother, a loving husband and an over-indulgent father to a troubled daughter. His attempts at striking out on his own ended in failure and worse - the later stages of his career are painful to read about, as he claims from a position he promised to introduce him to ever more glamorous circles and embroiled him in essentially criminal enterprises, whose consequences he avoided by presenting himself as naive. His last years alternated between showing up for cameo roles in films - something he clearly enjoyed hugely more than watching the results - and a semi-controlled home life, with raucous advisers, his daughter and carers (who claimed he grompt them) fighting over the sick old man.

There is a sense in which Lee's successful contribution to comic books ended as early as 1972, when he renounced and delegated his role as writer and editor to become publisher, and started concentrating on making himself into a Legend. Riesman has perhaps rather too much fun with Lee's endless self-promotion and dodgy deals: at one point, he sold back to Marvel creative rights he had already signed over to a company he co-owned with the outrageous comician Peter Paul, but whereas Paul ended up in jail,

Stan lied to investigators and prosecutors ... His game was "Oh, I'm just a simple old man that doesn't really understand what's going on in the company. I just want to help you out." As with so much associated with Peter Paul and Stan Lee, objective truth is elusive, and bombast drown out any potential contribution.

Certainly, this account of every-sharer praxis helps to make credible the New York millieu from which America's worst president was to emerge. Yet even at his most critical, Riesman has to acknowledge the charm and chutzpah of the man.

Riesman is merciless in his documentation of Lee's untrustworthiness. He goes through every self-aggrandizing claim Lee ever made, from his ten-year years onwards, and demonstrates a pattern of regular exaggeration and occasional downright lies. It's almost terrifying to watch him check, for example, the records of a local newspaper whose competitions Lee claimed to have won so often that he was asked to stop entering them; Riesman discovers that Lee's success was, at best, marginal. In later life, it galled him to confess to the role that nepotism had played in his career. - Lee told improbable stories about applying for and getting a job at Timely, and only later being noticed among the staff by Goodman, his mentor in dubious business ethics. Goodman also employed Jack Kirby, with whom Lee would develop a love-hate relationship that started when Lee worked with him on a character Kirby had already created, Captain America. The struggle between them for artistic credit for the creation of characters such as the Fantastic Four and the Hulk was eventually settled out of court, after Kirby's death in 1994.

During the so-called Silver Age of American comic books, "Written by Stan Lee, drawn by Jack Kirby" became a familiar line to millions of readers, but the truth was more complicated. The future collaborators had got off on the wrong foot in 1942, after Goodman found out that Kirby and his friend Joe Simon, with whom he had created Captain America, were moonlighting for a rival company and fired them. Kirby reasonably assumed that Goodman's nephew was the snitch. Yet they found themselves working together again, years later, this time with Lee as Kirby's boss, at a point where Marvel wasn't doing superhero comics at all - this was the era of the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's denunciation of comics as a source of juvenile delinquency - but rather created fictional lives for the superheroic names and the sort of monumental caggy features at which Kirby excelled.

In the early 1960s, rival companies like DC, which owned Superman and Batman, were doing good business, and Lee persuaded Goodman to try superhero comics again, which meant that they had to come up with new properties of their own - Captain America and the Submariner were not going to be enough. Kirby spent the rest of his life demanding that he be recognized as sole begetter of the Incredible Hulk, the Mighty Thor et al, and that Lee, as his editor, had merely rubber-stamped his ideas. Lee, on the other hand, could hardly deny Kirby's role in turning ideas into images, but claimed it was he who had had the ideas. That line has always been harder to prove, but not least because Lee had invented the so-called Marvel Method: he and Kirby would discuss a story, Kirby would draw all the panels and Lee would subsequently add all the dialogue. Lee further explained - rather conveniently - that he always added any comments on the artwork in pencil and erased them before they were sent off to be printed.

In spite of his mild antipathy to the subject of his book, Riesman is scrupulously fair in his treatment of such disagreements. Lee, to be clear, had a complicated relationship with the truth, but on occasion Kirby could be a bit of a shrewd racketeer. To that end, however, have a rather too similar dispute with Steve Ditko over Spider-Man and Doctor Strange. Ditko was an increasingly devout follower of Ayn Rand, and his drift away from Marvel started in part by Lee's (relatively) liberal politics in the late 1960s. It also has to be acknowledged that Kirby and Ditko had the very limited intellectual property rights of creators working for hire; Lee was their employer.

This is undoubtedly a story involving much shabbiness on Lee's part - friends had to chivy him into providing Kirby's widow with a pension, for example - but we get a sense too that Lee was a complex and nuanced man. Certainly neither Kirby nor Ditko went on to produce work that was as likeable, humane or memorable as their work with Lee had been. (Zack Snyder's Justice League, released last month, draws heavily on material Kirby created for DC in the 70s, though not his malicious caricature of Lee as a ’60s flasher.' And there was much less acrimony in Lee's collaborations with the next generation of writers and artists, among them Chris Claremont and Gene Colan.

In the end, we cannot know for sure who said what and who had which idea - if Lee simply said "Heroes, but with problems and flaws", that may have been enough of a contribution. Whatever Lee's own sins and personality flaws, he ended up masterminding what is perhaps the largest body of story in Western culture. The book ends - as it needed to - with Lee's younger brother Larry quoting The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance to Riesman: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend".

Rez Kaveney's Ballads: Night songs and necksverses will be published in late April. Selected Poems 2012-20 will appear later in the summer.

Stan Lee at the premiere of Thor, Los Angeles, 2011
Marriage à la mode?
A notorious case of high-society bigamy

OPHELIA FIELD
THE DUCHESS COUNTESS
The woman who scandalised a nation
CATHERINE OSTLER
466pp. Simon and Schuster. £20.

While there have been several biographies of Elizabeth Chudleigh (1720-80), who was famous for wearing a transparent dress to a masquerade ball, then being found guilty of bigamy by the Lords in 1776, many of them met her first in the whimsical, misogynistic pages devoted to her in T. H. White’s classic Age of Scandal (1950), where he calls her a “whore” and mentions her going off “to vamp” the Pope. The Duchess Countess gives a more empathetic perspective, combined with rigorous scholarship, to reveal Chudleigh in her full glory, with the last dozen years of her life in Russia, Estonia and France being perhaps the most fascinating.

Chudleigh fell from the genteel paradise of a childhood at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, where her father, Colonel Thomas Chudleigh, was the lieutenant-governor, in a more modest existence in Soho, only to be resurrected, via William Pulteney, a family friend, as one of Princess Augusta’s Maids of Honour. There she demonstrated a unique ability to maintain popularity in both George II’s and Frederick Prince of Wales’s rival courts. Soon after, she was seduced by the Hon Augustus Hervey, and what followed was the tragedy of the pro-divorce age coinciding with a peculiarly English fad for clandestine, romantic marriages. The wedding became an open secret such that, by 1752, “everybody knew”, and yet Chudleigh was allowed to retain her position. Horace Walpole mocked her as “the Virgin” while happily attending her Knightsbridge parties during the 1760s when the Duke of Kingston was supporting her.

She lived for years amid the highest echelons of the Whig oligarchy in a strange limbo, simultaneously respectable and fallen. The strain of this situation explains her decision to stick two fingers up to society by dressing as the semi-naked Iphigenia. Catherine Osler diagnoses much of Chudleigh’s behaviour as “borderline personality disorder”, which is a plausible but unnecessary attribution, likely to date more quickly than the rest of this excellent book.

Hervey sued for divorce when Chudleigh was almost fifty. Her successful self-defence – using a “jacket suit” in the ecclesiastical court to officially declare as false Hervey’s claim that they were married – allowed her to marry Kingston, believing this to be lawful. But after Kingston’s death, she became the target of general hatred “reserved for women who seemed to have ‘stolen’ power”, and particularly the target of Kingston’s disinterested nephews, the real villains of the piece, who were behind the subsequent charges of bigamy. Chudleigh returned from Rome for the trial before her peers (Hervey had become the Earl of Bristol) in April 1776.

Richard Holmes has written that “a trial, with its conflict of evidence and various possible interpretations of the truth, is to some extent a paradigm of the whole biographic enterprise”, but whereas Dr Johnson biases the reader in favour of Richard Savage, that analogous eighteenth-century charmer and chance, Osler never lets her trial scenes become one-sided. We are rooting for Chudleigh, yet she is no innocent. Osler’s emphasis is instead on how ludicrous it was for the Lords, the Commons and the entire legal system to be suspended for the trial’s duration, and for newspapers (those not extorting huge money) to be filled with its details, at a time when Britain was fighting the American War of Independence. It was the equivalent of our obsession with Meghan in the middle of a global pandemic.

Although she was found guilty, Chudleigh escaped punishment and fled the country. The trial, ironically, had brought her international celebrity that she enjoyed for yet another second life. She had earlier enjoyed a German Grand Tour “alone” (there were only five in her entourage) but now she visited Catherine the Great, who treated her on a par with the King of Sweden. She attempted to recreate a slice of Devon on the Estonian coast and died at another grand estate, rechristened Chudleigh, on the banks of the Seine.

Osler has undertaken impressive international archival research and always follows the money meticulously. The desperate, ordinary people hurt by aristocrats living on credit never get the space they deserve in such biographies, but at least the omission accurately conveys the myopia of those pre-revolutionary elites. Overall, Chudleigh’s is not a tale one expects to end well, yet her incredible strength of character – what the memoirist Baroness d’Oberkirk describes as her being “self-willed, opposed to all that received wisdom” – carried her over nearly every obstacle thrown in her path.

The book’s epigraph, very terse is a pleasure to read throughout. In the early chapters, it felt cinematic almost to a fault: a quantity of costume and other visual detail that would make a historical adviser redundant on any screen adaptation, and a “C'est la vie” at the back. By the end, however, I was fantasy-casting the surely inevitable adaptation and in awe of Catherine Osler’s thoughtful portraiture, both of Elizabeth Chudleigh and her century. ♦

OPHELIA Field is the author of The Favourite: Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, 2018, and The Kit-Cat Club: Friends who imagined a nation, 2009

Rising sons and daughters of Japan
Pen-portraits of emblematic figures

LESLEY DOWNER
THE JAPANESE
A history in twenty lives
CHRISTOPHER HARDING
466pp. Allen Lane. £25.

The Second World War was over and Japan in ruins when a child star called Misora Hibari appeared, with the sweetest voice imaginable. But when the eleven-year-old tipped her head coquettishly, cigarette in hand, and sang about being forced into prostitution, her audience found it uncomfortably close to home. One critic described her songs as the “music of a ruined nation”. For, as Christopher Harding writes in this fascinating retelling of Japanese history, she seemed to represent quite perfectly the spirit of the age.

Today, as Japan enters a new era, with a new emperor and a new prime minister, it seems a good moment to sum up where the country has come from and where it is going. Harding, a lecturer in Asian History at the University of Edinburgh, is well placed to do so. In his previous well-received book The Japanese Story (2009), he examined the history of modern Japan through the lives of an idiosyncratic collection of individuals. In The Japanese: a history in twenty lives his chosen stories range across the past 2,000 years.

For just about anyone, no matter how steeped in Japan, there is plenty that’s new and fresh and interesting here. Harding thrusts us into the harry-bury of history, pinpointing personalities that made each period unique and how it laid the foundations for the next, yet always bringing his story back to individual experience in a colourful kaleidoscope of times, people and places. He moves seamlessly from artistic and literary achievements and religious developments to brutal battles or the intricacies of modern day political maneuvering. Inevitably it’s a broad brush approach and he is particularly good at drawing out the big picture, setting events in their context.

There are surprising choices - the charismatic sixteenth-century warlord Oda Nobunaga rather than one of his even more successful contemporaries, the brilliant and witty Toyotomi Hideyoshi or the ultimate unifier of Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu; the writer Ibaru Saikaku, not the haiku poet Matsuo Bashō; the father of the Noh theatre, Zeami, not the great bunraku playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon. And it’s somewhat disconcerting to find many iconic figures – such as the dashing, doomed Yoshitsune, hero of the age of samurai – reduced to a name check. But Harding argues each case well and most of his choices really do seem, like Misora Hibari, to embody perfectly their period.

Himiko, ruler of the land of Yamata and a near contemporary of Boudicca, is the obvious starting point, the first name to be recorded in the annals of Japanese history. Along with Prince Shotoku, “founding father” of Japan, and Emperor Kamei, ...
a contemporary of Charlemagne, who founded the city of Kyoto, she is a nebulous figure, half lost in the mists of time.

With Murasaki Shikibu, Harding plunges us into the dazzling world of the Heian court, with its perfumes, silks and cult of beauty. Half a century before William the Conqueror, Murasaki was writing the world’s first novel, the astonishingly modern Tale of Genji. She is an obvious choice, Hōjō Masako, the Nani Shogun, less so. The widow of Japan’s first shogun, Yoshitomo, Masako ruled Japan in the aftermath of the battles immortalized in the epic Tale of the Heike. It seems somewhat provocative – if politically correct – to take a woman to represent this heroic age.

Harding makes a point of encompassing every aspect of society. From warfare we move on to religion and the turbulent priest, Shinnin, “the Martin Luther of Japan”, founder of a new and populist form of Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū, based on faith. A hundred years later Zeami was writing the beautiful, haunting plays of the Noh theatre, which helped transform the doughty warrior class into connoisseurs.

One fascinating character who is not on everyone’s radar is Hasekura Tsunenaga, who travelled to Europe and Russia in the early seventeenth century. Harding uses the story of his adventures to describe the rise and fall of Christianity in Japan, setting it in the context of the Reformation which was transforming Europe at the time.

The eighteenth century, the first century of rule by the Tokugawa shogun, was a Golden Age, “a culture defined by commerce, enterprise, consumption and enormous creativity”, as Harding writes in his measured way, thanks to a social order “so disciplined and constrained that it drove people into the arms of fantasy, pleasure and play”. How to pick one figure out of the plethora of creative geniuses who populated this period? Harding plumps for Ihara Saikaku, whose stories, like “The Life of an Amorous Man”, embodied the decadent ethos of the Edo Period.

For Harding the pre-modern and modern ages are well-trodden territory. To represent Japan’s Victorian age, the Meiji period, when the country was modernizing at breakneck pace, he chooses Hasekura Tsunenaga, Japan’s first woman doctor, and the pioneering businessman Shibusawa Eiichi. One of his most fascinating choices, the feminist poet Yosano Akiko, was a committed pacifist and “Tea Boat liberal” who turned 180 degrees and ended up supporting Japan’s incursions into China. Harding unravels the steps by which her thinking changed, embodying the change in Japanese attitudes that led up to the war and ended with Pearl Harbor.

He covers the Second World War in a page and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in half a paragraph. Representing the post-war economic miracle of the 1950s he chooses Tetsuro Harano, who made Japanese animation famous around the world.

Harding rounds off his epic story with Japan’s new Empress Masako, who gave up a promising career as a diplomat to marry into the imperial family. She now has a chance to come into her own. But will she be able to squeeze “the symbolic potential out of an existence marked by tight political constraints”? He ends with a question mark.

Lives less ordinary
How a family prospered from the French Revolution

LAURA O’BRIEN

AN INFINITE HISTORY
The story of a family in France over three centuries

EMMA ROTHSCILD


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December 1764, eighty-three people gathered in a boarding school in the town of Angoulême in south-western France. They came together to witness a pre-nuptial contract and in so doing left behind a snapshot of the world in which they lived — one that, although most of the signatories were born, lived and died in Angoulême, was fundamentally shaped by bonds with places far beyond the town. The bride’s father had died in Martinique several years before, and the family remained preoccupied by the fate of his missing fortune — and of the enslaved people he had owned in the Caribbean.

The marriage contract of Françoise Ferrand and Etienne Allendan is a central story in the history told by Emma Rothschild: though its guiding light is the bride’s illiterate mother, the widow Marie Aymard, the voices of Frances and Etienne’s children and descendants across the tumultuous world of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and around the globe.

In its focus on one family, An Infinite History seems to share common ground with Rothschild’s book The Inner Life of Empires (2011), which used the Scottish Johnstone family to examine the entanglements of empire on a more intimate scale. The Johnstones were, in Rothschild’s words, “large, odd, and enterprising”, their lives stretching across the British Empire and into the world of the Scottish Enlightenment. In contrast, the Ferrands and the Allemands — though also a large family, and with a spectacular history of successful and enterprising members — were rather less exceptional.

Aymard’s only marks in the historic record are her daughter’s marriage contract, and the power of attorneys drawn up regarding her late husband’s missing property. Without these, there could be no telling of Marie Aymard’s story, or that of her descendants. Most of the family did not leave behind the kind of personal sources historians normally turn to: there is no great corpus of family correspondence, only a few personal letters written by Aymard’s great-great-granddaughter to her brother, the missionary to China, Charles Lavergne, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, as Rothschild notes, Lavergne is the only family member “who became important.”

In its use of the archival record, An Infinite History belongs to the same genre as the French historian Alain Corbin’s The Life of an Unknown (2001), which reconstitutes a rural forestier and clockmaker and his world using brief references in the official record of post-revolutionary France. Aymard’s family were part of the creation of the bureaucratic and archival culture that ensured traces of the “unknown” were recorded for posterity. In 1757, Marie’s son, Gabriel Ferrand, was appointed as archivist for the Department of the Charantes, a new role designed to help manage the records of a revolutionary state: as Rothschild puts it, “an imposing appetite for paper”.

The scarp of information Rothschild has gleaned challenge assumptions about what it means to be a historical actor. The family were not directly involved in the political upheavals of the period, but they were a “revolutionary family” all the same. After 1789, they assumed roles as civil servants; they purchased hêna nationaux (property seized from the Catholic Church); one son, a priest, supported the revolution and subsequently left the priesthood to marry. As Rothschild notes, this is a story about what it is like to live during events that are beyond your control.

This perspective, perhaps, is what makes a family like this worth studying in such detail. Their experiences, after all, are more representative of the majority of their contemporaries than the histories of the exceptional few. Rothschild’s account of the economic lives and “divergent destinies” of Marie Aymard’s descendants, particularly in the period before 1870, is not concerned with the economic, the personal and the political. The book’s focus on family stories also upends traditional understandings about the pace of history: An Infinite History, the great political and economic transformations of the nineteenth century occur in line with the “rhythms of ordinary life”, and not the other way round.

The scale of Rothschild’s work is vast. This is a story (as the book’s title suggests) with infinite possibilities for following further connections spreading out from the central, original figure of Marie Aymard. As the story moves into the nineteenth century, it becomes somewhat fragmented as ever more descendents and family friends enter the picture. At times, the family seems to disappear completely, and the succession of names, births, deaths and marriages threatens to become overwhelming.

Ultimately, An Infinite History is a meditation on the traces individuals and families leave for future generations to discover. Though the limitations of her source material are sometimes obvious, Rothschild rightly rejects what she describes as an “ideological” division of the dead by historians between “important” — the people with substantial records — and “the unimportant... who can be counted, but cannot be understood”. Rather, as this book demonstrates, a focus on the “ordinary” can offer new perspectives on periods of extraordinary change.

Ethel Colburn Mayne

Timely new edition of major Irish stories, by Elke D’hoker

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In the footsteps of Alexander
A neglected successor to the great conqueror

JAMES ROMM

DEMETRIUS THE BESIEGER
PAT WHEATLEY AND CHARLOTTE DUNN
$52.80p. Oxford University Press. £100 (US $130).

Demetrius “the Besieger” – one of the warlords competing for power after the death of Alexander the Great – owes his nickname to two military campaigns. In the first, he disbanded the forces of his rival Cassander from the fortress of Moniychia in Piraia (307), causing Athens to raise him with honours befitting a god. The second, in 305-4, did not turn out so well. At Rhodes, an island state that had withheld crucial support from him, Demetrius undertook the mother of all sieges, but failed to break the Rhodian defences even with his heptolepis – a siege tower so massive that it needed thousands to roll it into place. After a year’s fruitless effort, Demetrius settled for a negotiated stand-down, and the abandonment of Rhodes was taken apart and sold off by the Rhodians. The income from this went to fund their famous Colossus, a statue of Helios that stood in offshore waters – though not, as Pat Wheatley and Charlotte Dunn demonstrate in Demetrius the Besieger, as a tribute to their harbour, the stasis so many poets and artists have imagined.

It is astonishing that Demetrius, the most vivid personality among the would-be successors of Alexander the Great, has only now become the focus of a book-length study. All the others have found biographers, from Antigonus One-eye, to Philetas, to Alexander, to Cassander, to Lysimachus. Demetrius has been only a supporting character in profiles of his father, Antigonus One-eye (a French study of 1968, by Claude Wulff). Antigone and Demetres, gave the two men equal billing, but not quite equal status. Philetas, bold and depressive in Plutarch’s account of Demetrius, includes gossipy and sometimes lurid stories about his subject’s sex life, has scored off historians, generally a decorous breed. Luckily it has not deterred Wheatley and Dunn, co-authors of this carefully researched account.

The Besieger’s career is not easily summarized, for it includes a bewildering series of changes of venue and fortune. Favourite son of Antigonus One-eye, who governed Piraia (in what is now Turkey) in Alexander’s name, Demetrius grew up so loved and trusted that Plutarch be did not cause alarm when he absent-mindedly carried weapons into his father’s private chambers. After Alexander’s death, he became Antigonus’ right-hand man, leading his father’s cavalry in battle from the age of twenty and helping extend the family’s hold over western Asia. He took on Ptolemy, his father’s foremost rival, in several engagements, and after defeating him at sea in 306 both father and son donned royal crowns. Demetrius was a king, though of what, no one was certain.

He sought to channel the legacy of Alexander in his own favour. He advertised his resemblance good looks, in coins and in portraits, styled his hair in Alexander’s dashing fashion, and flamboyed his visage with showy beards, including what has usually been taken for a scandalous romp with the courteous husband, held in the Parthenon itself. (Wheatley and Dunn propose a new interpretation of this notorious episode, seeing it as “an established Greek fertility rite and ceremonial act” in which Demetrius and Demetres were avatars of two gods.) As Alexander had done, he tried to build a personal myth based on youth, strength and grandeur of ambition, except that, unlike his great forerunner, he kept losing the crucial battles.

Wheatley and Dunn tend to be charitable. Historians since Plutarch have portrayed the siege of Rhodes as a humiliation for Demetrius, but these authors give him the benefit of the doubt. “The siege enabled the Antigonids to showcase their military might… rendering their later campaigns easier,” they write, endorsing a view expressed recently by W. M. Murray. This view makes Demetrius at Rhodes the successor to Alexander at Tyre; both men sought to demonstrate, by massive commitment of force and command of technology, that their targets had little hope. The message sent by the Colossus however – a statue begun perhaps a decade after the siege, while Demetrius still “bestrode the world” (or hoped to) – would seem to tend the opposite direction.

Other losses included the battle of Ipsus in Piraia (in 301), where Demetrius and his octogenarian father were overcome by the combined armies of their rivals. Plutarch tells several stories about the defeat, and for the death of Antigonus under a hail of javelins, but Wheatley and Dunn are once again inclined to give the Besieger more credit. The cavalry charge that took him by surprise, they argue, may not have been as reckless as Plutarch supposes. Whatever the truth, Demetrius lost control of the Asian portion of Alexander’s realm to Seleucus, one of the victors at Ipsus, and was forced back to Europe – though he never gave up his Asian ambitions, even after he had found a kingdom of his own in Macedon. In a second showdown with Seleucus, in 267, he was captured, and spent several grim years as a prisoner before drinking himself to death.

Demetrius the Besieger follows these twists and turns in gripping detail, conveying the drama of a life lived at fortune’s extremes while sorting through the sources with admirable caution. Wheatley and Dunn are judicious in their handling of Plutarch, who, as they perceive, sometimes reshaped Demetrius to make a better fit for Mark Antony, the Roman with whom Plutarch paired him in his Parallel Lives. At the same time the authors are not afraid to venture their own speculations, plausibly casting, for example, the relationship between the young Demetrius and his older companion Mithridates as pederastic and homoerotic.

Wheatley and Dunn rarely put a foot wrong in this masterly book, but their battle maps are an unfortunate exception. In an attempt to illustrate the movements of infantry and cavalry units, they have used poorly rendered silhouettes of hoplites and horsemen – toy soldiers, in effect, that greatly diminish the scale of Demetrius’ battlefield exploits.

All the world was a stage
Ancient Greek drama in the wider Mediterranean

JOHANNA HANINK

A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE THEATRE TO 300 BC
Volume Two: Theatre Beyond Athens
ERIC CASKO AND PETER WILSON

930pp. Cambridge University Press. £150.

What light does it shed on Aeschylus’ tragedy Persians to know that its Athenian debut in 472 BC was bankrupted by a young Pericles? Do the paradoxes at the heart of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex change if you find out that he came second in the tragedy contest at the festival where it premiered? Would Ismenia’s accusation that Antigone has “a warm heart for cold foods” ring differently if we knew who had sewn the original costumes, and how much the fabric had cost?

It is a cliché, and a self-fulfilling one, that ancient Greek drama has an exceptional ability to keep up with the times. Yet for all the strain that these plays speak to “universals” (precisely the trait that Aristotle saw as distinguishing poetry from history), the last generation has seen a boom in scholarship on the “particulars” of ancient Greek theatre. Where classical scholars once debated the conundrum of the Sophoclean hero, today they are at least equally concerned with the shape and size of dramatic festivals and the organization of actors’ guilds.

Eric Casko and Peter Wilson’s A Social and Economic History of the Theatre to 300 BC is poised to mark the curtain down on a generation of work in ancient theatre history. (The “theatre” of the title refers, essentially, to Greek theatre, though of course many other theatrical traditions predate 300 BC.) These authors, the city’s mayor (Volume Two), and the individuals, actors, patrons and others – who were somehow associated with the dramatic industry (Volume Three), have long been at the vanguard of this field, and their books are a must-have for anyone with an interest in the wider Mediterranean world. Much recent work in this field has stressed the importance of looking outside Athens and has dismantled old assumptions about both geographical and chronological axes. The theatre ‘industry’ turns out, did not cease to be dynamic, important and interesting the moment that Athens surrendered to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War at the end of the fifth century BC. That is more, despite the overwhelming dominance of Athenian material in the plays that survive, was far from the only place in classical Greece with a tradition of dramatic performance.

In thoroughly documenting both of those points,
Caspar and Wilson have performed herculean bibliographical and expert historical work. The discussions of the individual items of evidence are as comprehensive as the volume as a whole. Each ancient text is accompanied by an English translation, but there is no getting round the fact that this is a highly specialized resource: it is directed primarily at those already well versed in the cultural contexts in which ancient Greek theatre was deeply embedded.

The material is organized by geographical region, but several broader conclusions emerge. The authors repeatedly demonstrate how modern scholarship has failed to appreciate the "extent and seriousness" of "deme" theatre, that is in the villages and towns (demes) of the wider region of Attica. Theatre also seems to have done better in democracies than in states with oligarchical tendencies, although it was popular with tyrants and kings who fancied themselves cosmopolitan patrons of the arts. Athens itself was certainly a theatrical centre, but the ancient Greek world was host to a remarkable variety of local and indigenous performance traditions. And while Alexander the Great staged shows wherever he went, it is likely that many of the peoples he conquered were already familiar with Greek "theatre culture" before his army arrived. In short, the sum of the evidence - however maddeningly scant and fragmentary - suggests that nearly every aspect of ancient Greek theatre was more widespread, and started earlier, than is usually supposed.

The dossier also sparkles with several individual gems: a lead tablet from Sicily that curses the choregoi (producers) in a local competition; building accounts probably relating to the theatre at Epidauros; an extraordinary list of actors' victories in Greek theatre, Dodona, Epirus, Greece.

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**First, do some harm**

Classical doctors and their dangerous remedies

ALASTAIR BLANSHARD

**THE INVENTION OF MEDICINE**

From Homer to Hippocrates

ROBIN LANE FOX

432pp. Allen Lane. £25.

There is nothing like an outbreak of illness to make you feel grateful to the medical profession and, in this, the ancient world proved no different from the modern. The Greco-Roman world is full of inscriptions expressing the gratitude of individuals and communities to their doctors. In The Invention of Medicine, Robin Lane Fox takes us back to the earliest days of Greek medicine and the communities whose diseases it sought to cure. One of the texts he discusses is a doctor on Cyprus being awarded the equivalent of a decade's wages, substantial landholdings and an orchard. No matter how heart-felt the banging on a saucepan, it certainly makes some of the modern rewards for doctors and nurses look a little cheap.

This gratitude is doubly extraordinary when you consider how misplaced it was. Assembling the archaeological evidence, Lane Fox shows that a range of procedures were available to the earliest Greek doctors. These include bandaging, enemas, cupping (and subsequent bloodletting) and trepanning. Only bandaging is likely to have done the patient no harm. The blood loss that is part of "wet cupping" weakens the patient at the precise time that they can least afford it and the value of ancient trepanning is almost never outweighed by the risks of infection or damage to the cerebral membranes.

Other more exotic treatments outlined in the book include tying a woman upside down to a ladder and shaking it to reposition a prolapsed uterus or having wild, "uninhibited" sex with prostitutes to cure dysentery. It sounds messy, it sounds dirty in the area of battlefield medicine that we can see real value in medical interventions. For the most part, guided by misplaced philosophies about the operation of Nature and a gross imperfection in understanding of the anatomy of the body, ancient Greek doctors inflicted harm on their vulnerable, sick patients for centuries. Histories of medicine have a tendency to reveal in minor correct insights (along the lines of "observe how Homer correctly describes the effect of a brachial plexus lesion") and ignore the vast piles of corpses produced out of ignorance.

So why celebrate this bunch of well-meaning, but dangerous quacks? Why regard the invention of ancient medicine as an integral part of the "Greek Miracle" rather than its dirty little secret? A possible answer lies in two works whose analyses form a central feature of this book. The first, and more famous, is the Hippocratic Oath. The precise text and interpretation of the oath is a matter of dispute. Lane Fox provides his own translation of the central versed lines and guides the reader through the debates. He explains well the context of the Oath and more importantly shows its significance in establishing a system of ethics for the operation of the profession. It is an endorsement of the principle of patient confidentiality and in forbidding the physical and sexual abuse of patients by doctors, the text ushered in a standard of professional accountability hard to parallel in the ancient world and whose doctrines have become the bedrock of modern medical practice.

Lane Fox's interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath follows traditional scholarship. Where he departs from academic consensus, and where the book has its greatest value, is his treatment of the extraordinary early medical texts known as the Epidemics. These detailed case histories and outline the progress of a disease from the patient's very first symptoms through to either their recovery or death. In their pragmatic day-by-day account of how a disease manifests itself, they enshrine the value of detailed objective observation for the practice of medicine, and have proven invaluable and inspirational for medical practitioners from antiquity onwards to the eighteenth century.

Radically, Lane Fox is keen to date Books One and Two of the Epidemics very early in the story of the development of Greek medicine, much earlier than anybody else has done. To do so requires a complicated argument involving, among a number of other moving parts, the redating of various magistracies on the Greek islands. The case is ingenious, but unlikely to give the general reader much joy. Indeed, at times, it feels like there are two books trapped here, struggling to get out. The first is a brief and entertaining history of medicine, especially as it was practised on the island of Thasos where the author of the Epidemics worked for, at least, four years. The second is a technical discussion about the authorship and dating of works in the so-called "Hippocratic Corpus."

Throughout the book, Lane Fox is keen to identify himself as a historian. What he doesn't acknowledge is that is he actually a storyteller and this book shows all the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. He knows how to pace a narrative and he has written for many years, as detailed, but this also means that he is susceptible to flights of fancy. His reconstructions of the Greek world often have a curiously romantic twinge. It is a world populated by snooty aristocrats, free love and, contrary to the opinion of Herodotus, extremely vital horsemen. That said, knowing that all the while, a doctor was patiently lying in wait for his opportunity to give everyone an unnecessary enema does take away some of the rosettes.
Leaping, winning and cackling

FICTION

DETRANSITION, BABY
TORREY PETERS

The striking thing about Torrey Peters’s first novel (two earlier self-published novels also received critical attention) is the striking portrait of trans women’s lives in Obama-era Brooklyn, nor its mor¬dant wit, but the sheer accomplish¬ment of its carpentry. Peters glides elegantly forth and back in the lives of her three main characters. Little of the elaborate plotting—by way of email and mobile phone conversations—from location programmes — feels contrived.

Reese is a thirty-something unskilled trans woman with a his¬tory of relationships with other men. She had a more satisfying affair with Amy, a younger, better-off trans woman; but this ended dramatically, and Amy “de¬termined” to Ames. When Ames later inadvertently impregnates her lover and boss Katrina, he tries to resolve their uncertainties about paren¬thood (and heal the past) by sug¬gesting Reese as a co-parent — an initially starting idea to which both Karina and Reese gradually warm, until it wins sudden but inevitable snags.

In part a novel about the dialogue between three articulate and angry people in an intense situa¬tion, much of its strength lies in their capacity to say and do almost unforgettable things to each other. Opening up about his past brings Ames’s unexamined white privilege into focus (and that of Reese), and bringing into the picture a probably inadvert¬ent affront to the privileges of cis-privileged Katrina. Peters is a startlingly hard on her three principals’ faults — not least through a choice of group. There are some brilliantly accurate set pieces of New York life: a cocktail party where divorcees discuss ther¬apists and essential oils; a funeral for a trans friend at which the older generation upset the younger with gallow’s humour about a trans remake of a 1960s romcom “Pey¬ron Funerals and a Funeral”.

And Peter’s humour is cutting — when the younger Amy takes a dubious online test of “gender” trans¬ident it morphs into the test of genu¬ine human identity from Phillip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Elec¬tric Sheep? The dark comedy here doesn’t mean saying the absurdly un¬sayable — including the implic¬ation that “detransitioning” has not been a perman¬ent one for Ames, who is a way of numbing pain. Reese — and Ames, echoing her — discusses the “Sex and the City” dilemma: confronting all women with their three options: knowledgeful, a child, your career or art. In the end, SATC preached, there is only friendship. We grow to care about Reese, Ames/Amy and Kat¬rina enough that their eventual relationship makes for a satisfying conclusion even though we know, as they cannot, the historical ir¬onies of their uncertain future. In the face of current journalistic and political hostility to trans people, this novel offers a brave defence of the complexity of what it means to be a woman — and a mother.

Roz Kaveney

ICELAND

ISLAND ZOMBIE
ISLAND ZOMBIE
RONI HORN

“I’m sure Roni Horn has really good books on all the time. Grass does not stick to her”, writes Eileen Myles in the title essay of an own collected art writings. The Importance of Being Iceland (2005).

“If she trails mud her assistants put it in envelopes and save it for her archive.” Horn first visited Iceland in 1975 at the age of nineteen; she continues to return with “migratory insistence and regularity”, a tra¬bird, a like and a like of indigenous artists who have washed up on the island, as Icelandic culture itself goes global. Island Zombie is a distil¬lation of the artist’s photographs.

Often occupying no more than half a page, these fragmentary glimpses and reflections are indeed like “swimming pools”. Horn is an adept swimmer, volume that evokes Ice¬land’s forlorn emptiness as much as its places and people.

It is described herself as a “per¬petual tourist”, but her close involve¬ment in Icelandic cultural life is documented here. (The only evidence of her outlier status is a faith in the myth that Iceland has no trees.) Her column for the national newspaper Morgunbladid offers a mix of profound observa¬tions on local subjectics: kittens, nothingness, the national material of newsprint itself, and of course swimming pools. Horn is an adept chronicle of transitory moments; she is also driven by concern for the future of the nation’s fragile eco¬system. In “Hot Seat”, a comment¬ary on the collapse of the Academy of the Arts, Reykjavik, in 2006, Horn speaks of witnessing “the obliteration of a whole extinction — of islands in our time.”

Horn once considered making an inventory of every rock on the island. However, her work is best taken in parts as a strange kind of ephemeral atmosphere, as “Vataasah” (Library of Water), a long-term installation of melted glacial water in a former library in Stykkisholmur. “Weather Reports You” (2007) records Stykkisholmur’s residents’ stories about the wea¬ther, including a lighthouse keeper, some fishermen, the postmaster, and teenage boys who just want the sun to shine so they can play base¬ball. It is a “collective self-portrait” because weather “tells us who we are”. Horn imagines it expanding, so that weather reports come in from Palermo, Nişhnya Novgorod and Lake Balkal. Iceland is only the beginning — a metonymy for the

Nancy Campbell

HISTORY

ON THE DEATH OF JEWISH Photographs and history NADINE FRESCO
Translated by Sarah Cliff

A Jewish electrician is sent to undertake repairs in the house of an SS man. In a half-open drawer, he finds a small stack of film neg¬atives. He holds them up to the light, but he knows all too well what they show: a mass grave; women standing in a line at the edge of a ditch, staring out at the Baltic sea. It is 1942. It has been a year since the first administration prohibited the taking of photographs at execution sites, ordering that any and all images of their actions be destroyed. The order has to be rescinded again and again; the SS men cannot stop taking photaguers. The electrician pockets the negatives and on each one an acquaintance to make copies. When this is done, he returns the originals to the drawer. He places the prints — now, now — in a small box and buries it next to a stable.

Decades later, his niece, the French historian Nadine Fresco, stares at the prints and asks: “To whom do these photographs belong?” Now infamous, they are some of the only surviving images of the Holocaust by-bullets, rare documents of how the Jews of Eastern Europe were obliterated. The dunes of Škudë beach, just north of the Latvian city of Liepāja, “the city where the wind was born”, is where their bodies lie.

In her essay “Photographies” (2007), now translated into English by Sarah Cliff and published under the title of the original volume, fresco asks why it is that, ever since the first documentary film was shot in the Moscow State Archives in 1939, they have never stopped circulat¬ing. They are not infre¬quently mislabelled, as docu¬mentary evidence of one massacre, they have come to symbolize them all. “Who owns the rights to them? And what rights come into play here? Moral rights? The copyright, a

right so widespread that it only needs the lacunar and vigilant sym¬bol of ©?”, fresco asks. “These issues have become even more pointed now that history and memory have gone ‘online’: questions involving appropriation are constantly being raised by the Internet.”

Fresco gazes at the photographs and sees the human behind the camera, “since it is a human being”, she writes. She considers the profes¬sionalism of these and other images, she observes how carefully they must have been taken, how passionately the photographer regarded the scenes unfolding in front of him. Here is a Holocaust study — no, it’s not. She identifies the perpetrators and witnesses on both sides of the lens, as well as those deliberately left outside the frame: relations between the photographs themselves and not just their copy¬right that belong to the public domain”, Fresco writes. “That is, to human beings as a whole. To history.”

Linda Kinger

RADICALISM

ENGLISH RADICALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
A distinctive politics?
RICHARD TAYLOR
288pp. Manchester University Press. £25.

The fortunes of radical politics in twentieth-century Britain can be seen as a minor historical puzzle. The political tradition that emerged during the eighteenth century in opposition to corrupt and exploita¬tive political institutions, and in pursuit of a more just and economic power, and sought a rem¬edy in enfranchisement and consti¬tutional reform, might be thought to have lost much of its relevance with the establishment of the supremacy of the House of Commons over the Lords in the early twentieth century, and with the unification of the franchise in 1928. Yet these developments did not render radicalism obsolete. Simon Maccoby’s exhaustive six¬volume history of the tradition (1955–60) concluded with a volume covering the first half of the twentieth century, which was only tenta¬tively subtitled “The end” and historians have identified radical currents in labour, liberal and even conservative politics deep into the twentieth century.

Richard Taylor traces the history of radicalism over that period through the work of leading figures who suspect (Bertrand Russell, George Orwell, Michael Foot and others), and of some more unusual ones (Joan Maynard, Nicola Walter). His study of these events is impos¬sible and diverting, although not all of them break new ground, and the nature of the “radicalism” that such a diverse group of thinkers osten¬sibly shared is sometimes obscure. More importantly, the self-con¬tained spokespeople of each of their chosen writers leaves little scope for Taylor to show how radical politics developed over the twentieth century, or to appraise its historical significance.

This is unfortunate, because the history of radicalism has much to tell us about Britain’s recent political history and about its contem¬porary political predicament. There was a major revival of radical political language from the mid¬1960s, when the idea of “the Establish¬ment” passed into common usage and was adopted by Harold Wilson in his successful general election campaign in 1964. But as Wilson proceeded to present Labour as what he called “the natural party of government”, he made Britain’s incomplete social democracy vulnerable to the quasi¬radical criticism that it was itself an “Establishment”, constraining tra¬ditional popular freedoms — a vulner¬ability that Margaret Thatcher readily exploited, and that has overshadowed the politics of wel¬fare in Britain ever since. With the advent of a self-described “people’s government” that treats parlia¬ment, judicial independence and the rule of law as dispensable...
inconveniences, and the state as a source of guaranteed profit for the private sector, we may not yet have seen anything like “the end” of radical politics in Britain. Taylor’s book is therefore a welcome step towards further study of its recent and contemporary history.

Stuart Middleton

ILLNESS

A STILL LIFE
A memoir
JOSIE GEORGE

O
er a year of lockdowns, many of us have become accustomed to spending most of the time at home. But for Josie George, social isolation is nothing new. Chronic illness long ago reduced her territory to her home and garden. Apart from accompanying her son to school on her mobility scooter and visiting a community centre 100 metres from her front door, her frame of reference is often no wider than a single room. “I write this from my bed in an old terraced house”, her memoir begins; “Same old walls, same old view”. The magic of A Still Life is how George finds joy and purpose despite extreme limitations, relaying her past and present without a trace of self-pity.

Opening on New Year’s Day and travelling from one winter to the next, the book is a window onto George’s quiet existence as well as the turning of the seasons. Alternating sections, a page or two in length and demarcated by the heading ‘THEN’, start in her childhood and gradually catch up to the present. The framework effectively mimics how fragmentary memo- ries, especially traumatic ones, resurface in everyday life - weeks spent in the hospital, accompanied by suspicious questions and conflicting diagnoses; losing her virginity in adolescence; her parents’ divorce; dropping out of high school, and various broken relationships, including that with her son’s father.

Given various names over the years (disautonomy, chronic fatigue syndrome and sensory processing disorder, among others), George’s condition remains mysterious and involves unpredictable fatigue and infections. Pain and weakness are constants, though, and require her to rest frequently. The enforced stillness, as she notes, demand that she take more consideration to nature as well as to human behaviour. She remarks that the best day of the year is when she hears her first blackbird. Impishly, she choreographs people’s movements to the Vivaldi in her headphones. The entries are infused with longing and ironic wistfulness. George declares that she feels destined to “keep win and cackle and make bold, kind mischief until the day I die, and oh, god help me, I want to”.

It comes as a surprise - for readers, as for the author - when, midway through the year, she falls in love and embarks on a long-distance romance. Yet the promise of her world opening outwards does not negate the value of calm acts of witness. An unwriting guru, George writes wistfully yet intimately. Wrestling contentment and meaning from chronic pain, she has the wisdom to say, at the end of a sixteenth year in her house, “Same walls, same view. I am glad of it. There is a difference between being stuck and being rooted, and my roots stretch down deep.”

Rebecca Foster

LANGUAGES

MODERN LANGUAGES
Why it matters
KATRIN KOHL
140pp. Polity. £35.

D
oes language affect who we are? In Modern Languages, Why it matters, Katrin Kohl suggests that the language we speak is a root that binds us to the heritage of our community. Often, multiple heritage intertwined: South Africa recognizes eleven official languages and in Senegal people regularly switch between Wolof, Pulaar, Serer, Jola, French, Arabic and English. There are probably more bilingual and multilingual speakers in the world than monolinguals. Most Britons, however, are notoriously monolingual; in anglophone countries such as Britain, “language diversity may collapse simply into ‘English’ versus ‘foreign’”. But the expectation that the rest of the world speaks English is damaging; “much like uncontrolled business interests are threatening biodiversity, the domination of English is threatening linguistic diversity.”

Perhaps Kohl’s most eye-catching claim is that language diversity is a human rights issue because freedom of language is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. According to UNESCO, 40 per cent of the world’s population does not have access to education in a language they understand. The impact on equality and empowerment, particularly regarding women’s rights and healthcare, is significant. Languages can be used to entrench positions of power and maintain hierarchies, with minority groups often linguistically marginalized, too. Whether a person speaks a language “empowered by imperial expansion” or a language “suppressed or obliterated by such expansion” will determine opportunities. As Kohl points out, “asserting any right depends on making oneself heard in a language that is shared by those in power”.

Kohl is good on language as the intersection between politics and culture. In Wales and Catalonia, for example, “a distinct linguistic heritage interacts with a distinct political identity”. After all, language is the best instrument for expressing our emotional, intellectual and social identity. Learning a foreign language trains our “cultural intelligenciness”. Translating enables us to explore difference and develop the imagination; in encountering other ways of being, we can come to know ourselves better. Research even suggests that bilinguals are better than monolinguals at conflict resolution.

While Kohl’s conclusions can be repetitive, and some readers might find the stress on “transferable skills” rather corporate, Modern Languages is a clear and engaging reminder to monolingual first-language English speakers of their responsibility to respect, embrace and promote linguistic diversity. At its best, this book is a manifesto for a multilingual future.

Esme O’Keefe

METROCOLONIES

MODERNISM IN THE METROCOLONY
Urban cultures of empire in twentieth-century literature
CAITLIN VANDERTOP

W
hen Suva became the capital of Fiji in 1877, British colonial settlers were accused of building a city in a swamp. Like Venice, Suva can seem anything but an urban success story. But hidden in the sea at its edges, its land landscape shaped by rhythms of nature. Rainstorms and winds from the Pacific Ocean shake the coast; mangrove swamps poll the soaked ground underwater. In the late nineteenth century, colonial settler began to fill this unsteady sea port with the familiar furniture of empire - banks, churches, dental surgeries, prisons and obscurely commemorative statues - and the effect was visibly incongruous. In her monograph Modernism in the Metrocolony, Caitlin Vandertop defines the process by which Suva came to be transformed as “epidermic” - the skin of the watery coast changed, but its environmental and socio-economic problems persisted, while the area’s natural beauty drew the eye away from the new architecture. A paradoxical relation emerged between old and new, natural and urban, native and imperial, that deepened as the indigenous realities of coastal life asserted themselves.

The late queer theorist Sam See writes that the “material world” is “comprised of difference, not of dominance”, and Vandertop’s slick new book may be understood to confirm this theory. Her coinage “metrocolony” gathers into one conceptual category Suva. Singapore, Bombay, Dublin and a list of other cities across the globe where a form of imperial cosmopolitan surgery has produced clumsy results. The history of the metrocolony has been one of failure; dominance has never worked. Vandertop’s interest in Modernism in the Metrocolony lies specifically in the way the incoherent modernity of the metrocolony forces us to rethink the relationship between modernist literature and capitalism.

In recent years, it has become commonplace for literary historians to assume that the body of radically experimental writing produced during the Machine Age, and named “modernism”, was a product of the economic and social conditions associated with advanced capitalism. This critical assumption has led to a preoccupation to situate modernist literary activity in Europe and North America, where the fruits of capitalist modernity - virtual wealth, urbanization and technological progress - are at their most conspicuous and impressive. Pushing against this critical norm, Vandertop carries her account of modernism to Fiji, India, Singapore and to Europe’s colonial adjunct, Ireland, arguing that modernity reached here too, but in the essentially dubious form of the metrocolony. In readings of works by Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T. E. Forster, Mall Raj Anand, and the Fijians Vanessa Griffin and Subramani, she paints a picture of modernity not as a holistic phenomenon, but an intimate encrustation on places and people that were much better off without it. This portrayal of the process of modernization as silly at best, but worst is a kind of bitter antipode to the myths of progress that have long persuaded us to like modernity more than we should.

Beal Carver
Beings from inner space
Jung's records of encounters with his unconscious

PHIL BAKER

THE BLACK BOOKS
C. G. JUNG

Edited by Sonu Shamdasani

WHILE CARL JUNG and Sigmund Freud were still on speaking terms, Freud insisted they must never abandon “the sexual theory”: his central dogma of repressed sexual material as the origin of neurosis. The sexual theory was the vital barrier, he said, because without it they would be facing “the black tide of mud—of occultism”.

The kind of thing Freud was so anxious to block out is overwhelmingly manifest in this seven-volume set of Jung’s notebooks, spanning 1913-32. They represent the coherence of Jung’s introspection, from which he mined and polished his more accessible Red Book (perhaps his seminal work, despite remaining unpublished until 2009). The Black Books detail Jung’s visionary encounters with entities such as Phanes the star god, Ila the sorceress, and Philemon, the wise magician who became Jung’s internal guru.

The technique of this introspective exploration is what Jung would later call “active imagination”, a wavelike dreaming where the imagined takes on a life of its own. It is a process that invites metaphors: Jung fantasized that with his deep introspection he was digging a hole. The pre-eminent Jung scholar Sonu Shamdasani, in his characteristically accomplished introduction, suggests Jung might even have started by physically digging in his garden. The attempt to reach this notionally lower level by removing conscious restraints and controls involved an abaisement du niveau mental (the French term has stuck from Jung’s pupil Pierre Janet) that allowed unconscious material to appear. Jung felt there was something in the background of his dreams that could come forward, if only he switched off conscious control as much as possible: “One submits to the necessary conditions—as in a macabre experiment—so that it emerges.”

Some fairly extraordinary things did emerge, supposedly from the unconscious. Meeting his soul was a declared intention at the very start of the project, as to if combat the historical “disenchantment of the world” noted by Max Weber. When he did meet her (female by longstanding convention rather than some personal idiosyncrasy, but clearly overlapping with Jungian ideas of the anima), she spoke to him like an external being and gave him some stern relationship advice: “no more letters to women, no moaning”. In addition to his wife, Jung was involved with two women, “the white one” and “the black one” identified by Shamdasani as blonde Maria Molzer and brunette Toni Wolff—and his soul said “Let the black one go... She can’t give you what you need”, elaborating in a later session the “black one is dishonestly clever. I understand that you love her, but I would like to get rid of her.”

Jung famously—perhaps notoriously—asserted that psychological complexes could be autonomous within the psyche, behaving like independent beings and even people, which takes us more than half way towards the region of demons and spirits. Some of his internal adventures resemble the dealings of W. B. Yeats with his daimons, Leo Africanus, and Alistair Crowley with his “Holy Guardian Angel” Aiwass. Shamdasani notes a relationship to ritual invocation practices within old-school theatre or high magic, notably in the world of lambilicho’s On the Mysteris (Jung owned a 1947 edition) and makes an interesting link to the far less well-known figure of Ludwig Staudenmaier, a chemical professor who published “Magic as an Experimetnal Science” in 1912 (Die Magie als experimentelle Naturwissenschaft—It seems never to have been translated). Staudenmaier had been experimenting since 1901, and at first used automatic writing, but then found he no longer needed to write in order to communicate with the characters who appeared; he moved on to the wider induction of auditory and visual hallucinations, and explained magical experiences in terms of “underconsciousness” and personification. Jung owned Staudenmaier’s book and annotated it.

What separates Jung from the overtly esoteric—albeit it is a not a firm boundary—is that he insists he is dealing psychologically with fantasy, and ultimately not with beings from anywhere other than inner space. But this went with its complementary insistence that what he was encountering was real experience, and not literary creation. Jung’s soul later advised him to drop Molzer instead of Wolff. She happened to be out of favour with Jung himself because she thought of his fantasies as art—in an entirely positive sense—rather than the raw unconscious manifestations he desperately needed to see them as. This issue of artistic creation versus psychic manifestation parallels the question that dogged surrealism (which was supposed to be noth ing more or less than “pure psychic automatism” in André Breton’s definition), of how authentically automatic even automatic work really was. Like a would-be medium, Jung described himself as “the non-author and copyist” of the Sepher Seraphim ad Mortem section from his notebooks, preferring to attribute it to the long-dead Gnostic writer Basilides.

Jung was a considerable visual artist, and when he sent three mandala paintings to Richard Wilhelm—the translator responsible for an influential version of the I Ching—he left them anonymous and told Wilhelm they represented “an excellent image of the unconscious European spirit to grasp the essence of psychic experience as it is unconscious. Visions of quite how far these carefully crafted and aesthetically judged works can be described as unconscious. It is a long way from the repressed unconsciousness of Freud, and it is because the larger meaning is unknown, and the full quasi-religious significance not yet grasped. Instead of Freud’s retrospective, causal, materialistic approach, the Jungian quest for meaning often seems to involve things which are “hard-wired”, as we might now say, but given an oddly Neoplatonic twist as he gropes towards a secular immediacy.

Along with playing down art-as-art, Jung was also understandably anxious to demarcate his work from religion, although it was steeped in Gnosticism and kindred areas. Shamdasani seems to have little difficulty accepting the poet-like signs and wonders that accompanied Jung’s psychic reception of the Sepher Seraphim: “a striking series of paranormal psychological events” including a ringing doorbell. It seems to have been Jung’s discovery of alchemy that made the whole of the end of the present notebooks project, surpassing Neoplatonism and Gnosticism and ushering in the alchemical turn which dominated his work for its final decades.

There has been some debate over how far Jungianism can be considered a cult, stirred up by the maverick Jung scholar Richard Noll and soon turning acrimonious. Jung’s followers might not see a historical cult in their organizational dynamics, but there is something cultish about Jung’s legacy in a larger sense of the word, and the reverence of this magnificent publication is entirely in tune with it. Not only do the rubricated title pages of each volume have something ecclesiastical about them, but it is a moot point how many readers will really need along a thousand pages of handwriting in German, accompanying some five hundred pages of text in translation. Over and above making the translation checkable, the luxurious facsimile includes blank pages and endpapers and, given the 1:1 scale of the reproduction, the fact that one notebook is taller has necessitated a box-like block over the others. The title has a whiff of infernal glamour about it, although the name simply comes from the notebook is black cursive; it was a happy accident they weren’t beige or plum. Confirming the occult side of Jung, and the cultural importance of the esoteric in the twentieth century, for better or worse these ur-volumes are unmistakably Holy Books.
In next week’s

TLS

DOUGLAS FIELD

Going underground with Richard Wright

TLS CROSSWORD 1372 BY TALOS

ACROSS
1 Detective McMurphy’s wearing month with drug man (4, 6)
2 Hood’s muffled (6)
10 Fairy snapped in a hotel (8)
11 Head of company managed car firm in country town (8)
12 A journey taken by river in ship (4)
13 Got academic student digs in Dorothy’s place (6, 4)
15 Very touching story set around Connecticut island (7)
17 Fantastic Dahl character associated with red steps? (7)
20 Scrooge is one cold fish, hoarding pile (10)
21 I produced Death in Venice in person on radio (4)
23 After an accident, sue a sour but thoughtful bloke (8)
25 Large folk making bread for folk such as Ritas? (8)
26 Detective with rock-star dad in small three-wheeler (6)
27 Star rise is moving for writers such as Douglas Adams (10)

DOWN
2 A shade put over head of Robbie and frilly Talls? (6)
3 European tax put to flight rich inheritess (3, 5)
4 A new bit of advice Felix briefly put to American twin (10)
5 “By chanting dirges through a Market-Town, / With gentle Step — the solemn Train” (Mira’s Will, Mary Leapor) (7)
6 Strip West Ham player picked up for one sorting out matches (4)
7 I tour all over the place with a man, a bullish type (8)
8 Children’s writer only in debt after an upheaval (4, 6)
12 Shift for one cat in shirt needing work (10)
14 Bloke who’s a bit of an ass dancing on a counter (10)
15 I’m told they’ll inspect Johnson’s country house (8)
18 Vivie young man and heroic captain meeting a very experienced corporal (3, 5)
19 Conservapedia up late renovated Italian house (7)
22 “It is the very error of the moon; / She comes more — earth than she was wont, / And makes men mad” (Othello) (6)
24 Looks at Joe Essex continuously (4)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1368

The winner of Crossword 1368 is Clive Unger/familiar, of Shepton Mallet

The sender of the first correct solution opened on May 7, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1372, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF
Reopening, baby

Rejoice just a little, if you dare: the bookshops of England, which were officially deemed to be “non-essential” during the third national lockdown, have reopened this week. On its website, Penguin is imploring readers to go forth and buy, specifically, a debut novel: “for authors launching books 2020 and 2021 have been uniquely challenging. No bookshops open has meant quiet launches for authors; it’s also meant that booksellers have less understanding of the new books that people want to read.”

We look forward to reading reports of the “Long Covid” effect on literature, in due course.

The grand reopening prompts us to pause and acknowledge the helpful guidance to the world of books provided by the media, social or otherwise, during recent weeks. The broadsheets, for example, have mustered a couple of reviews of The Book Collectors of Daraya by Delphine Minou, now translated by Lara Vergnaud; it sounds like an impressive account of a horrific situation. How does it compare to Syria’s Secret Library by Mike Thomson, published a couple of years ago, which is also about Daraya (never mind to the French original)?

The reviewers don’t bother to mention Thomson’s book, so it must be irrelevant. We won’t go looking for it on our first shopping spree.

Thanks, too, to the friendly and entirely buggy-free Wild Woman Writing Club, whose open letter to the directors and trustees of the Women’s Prize for Fiction warned us off “pursuing a copy of Detention,” Baby by the transgressor writer Torey Peters (see p24). “In its time,” the letter notes, “the Women’s Prize has championed many great books by women.” But this longlisted novel is an “extended male fantasy” – the Wild Woman Writing Club do not acknowledge the validity of the term “transgender” – and, brushing aside counter-complaints that their letter is a “transphobic disgrace,” they have charmingly redoubled their assault on both Peters’s book and the Women’s prize. We call that £22.99 saved for spending on many great books by friendly and entirely buggy-free authors instead.

By contrast, we shall be looking out for an available copy of A Lost Novel by Jane Austen, edited by P.J. Allen (Troubador, £22.50). This is a new edition of an obscure work called Two Girls of Eighteen, which was attributed on its title page, on its original publication in 1860, to an “old man.” Allen knows better. The two girls of the title are involved in two plots, a “Romance partly based on Richardson’s Clarissa” and “a Gothic confection,” and their dual story (or extended male fantasy?) leads to “reflections” on subjects such as “medicine, law, the rights of women, etc.”

Sophie Calle’s “below the glossy surface of the major novels” and showing us “the complex web of thought that lies beneath.” Two Girls was “never previously identified as Jane’s,” but why let an utter lack of supporting evidence, family tradition, or Austrian “glossy surface” get in the way of a good story?

Whenever the government’s “route back to a more normal life” permits, a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum could be in order. Following the announcement of cuts to the National Art Library (see March 19), for example, you might feel like scowling in person at any passing representatives of the V&A’s management team; and then you might feel like rewarding yourself by taking an exhibition: Alice: Curiouser and curioser. (Perhaps the same management team responsible for those cuts insisted on spelling out the allusion contained in that subtitle.) Postponed since last summer, this exhibition on a theme of Lewis Carroll is now due to run until the end of the year. Its highlights include Salvador Dalí’s “Mad Tea Party” and Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographic portrait of Alice Liddell herself. The press release promises theatrical sets, large-scale digital projections and immersive environments. Did we mention already that the V&A is closing its Theatre and Performance department?

Anyway, amid the curiouser fare, look out for a sketchbook: a “costume sketchbook” by Sir John Tenniel, never previously exhibited. It was bought at a book fair in 1977 by Jake Flor, the co-founder of the Alice Through the Looking Glass shop in Cecil Court. Above is the “really impressive depiction of a knight on horseback” that caught Mr Flor’s eye – or rather, here is Kate Hepburn’s newly coloured version of Tenniel’s drawing, as it appears in a book (that Flor was already working on when he bought Tenniel’s sketches) now published, under the bookshop’s own imprint, as Through a Looking Glass Darkly (€19.95).

Or rather, here are two Tenniel – the knight and the branches that creep jaggily above him being separate items only combined in this volume. Yes, that seems to be it. We think we’ve got it now. Only don’t ask us to describe the story in Flor’s book, in which a further adventure for Alice is interspersed with esoteric episodes set in Montmartre at the turn of the nineteenth century, involving Alexandre Crowley. Flor’s afterward endeavours to explain the latter element. There is no accounting, however, for gaps such as “the large bunch of carrots” Alice sees tied to this valiant fellow’s saddle. (They are “For Knight vision!”)

Correspondence. Tony Abbott writes from Trumbull, CT with a welcome clarification: in enumerating this year’s multiple anniversaries relating to the actor and writer Dirk Bogarde (March 29), including his debut as a poet (in the TLS, in 1949), we referred in passing to the film Death in Venice and “Thomas Mann’s doomed composer Gustav von Aschenbach.” What nonsense: Mann’s Aschenbach is a writer. Bogarde plays Aschenbach the composer in Luchino Visconti’s film. And then again there is the ballet by John Neumeier (2003), in which the protagonist becomes – now where did Neumeier get this idea from? – a choreographer.

In Benjamin Britten’s operatic Death in Venice, Aschenbach remains a writer; and was first played, in 1973, by Peter Pears. As Mr Abbott points out, the charity Britten Pears Arts recently tweeted images of the prop notebook that Pears used, in which he would scribble while on stage. “What are these WARNINGs ALL OVER THE CITY?” the tenor wrote, opposite a frenzy of interrupted “Tadzio”.

A London correspondent, meanwhile, informs us that in quoting Bogarde’s poem “Steel Cathedrals” about the soldier’s tedious “life in stations,” waiting for a train – we were also quoting a cult indie pop album of the early 1990s. So Rough (1995) by the band Saint Etienne, we hear, begins with a world-weary voice (supposedly Bogarde’s own), intoning an idling line from the poem: “A cigarette, a cup of tea, a bun ...”, “Cheer up, old man. Haven’t you heard? They’re reopening the bookshops.”