



Circumstantial Shakespeare (Oxford Wells Shakespeare Lectures)

Lorna Hutson

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Shakespeare's characters are thought to be his greatest achievement--imaginatively autonomous, possessed of depth and individuality, while his plots are said to be second-hand and careless of details of time and place. This view has survived the assaults of various literary theories and has even, surprisingly, been revitalized by the recent emphasis on the collaborative nature of early modern theatre. But belief in the autonomous imaginative life of Shakespeare's characters depends on another unexamined myth: the myth that Shakespeare rejected neoclassicism, playing freely with theatrical time and place. *Circumstantial Shakespeare* explodes these venerable critical commonplaces. Drawing on sixteenth-century rhetorical pedagogy, it reveals the importance of topics of circumstance (of time, place, and motive, etc.) in the conjuring of compelling narratives and vivid mental images. "Circumstances"--which we now think of as incalculable contingencies--were originally topics of forensic inquiry into human intention or passion. In drawing on the Roman forensic tradition of circumstantial proof, Shakespeare did not ignore time and place. His brilliant innovation was to use the topics of circumstance to imply offstage actions, times and places in terms of the motives and desires we attribute to the characters. His plays thus create both their own vivid and coherent dramatic worlds and a sense of the unconscious feelings of characters inhabiting them.

Circumstantial Shakespeare offers new readings of *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Lucrece*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Macbeth*, as well as new interpretations of Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* and Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*. It engages with eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism, contemporary Shakespeare criticism, semiotics of theatre, Roman forensic rhetoric, humanist pedagogy, the pre-history of modern probability, psychoanalytic criticism, and sixteenth-century constitutional thought.

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