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Review of Steve Sohmer, 'Shakespeare's mystery play: the opening of the Globe 1599' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)

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Steve Sohmer Shakespeare's Mystery Play: The Opening of the Globe 1599
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) xii+292pp., ISBN 0 7190 5544 X
hardback £35; 0 7190 5566 0 paperback £12.99

Although amongst Shakespeare's most frequently-performed and widely-read plays, Julius Caesar (the 'mystery play' of this book's title) was, according to Steve Sohmer, an occasional piece written for the opening of the Globe playhouse on the afternoon of 12 June 1599. At least, it was 12 June by the calendar of Julius Caesar which was still in use in England. This particular day was propitious because it was both the summer solstice--the longest day--and a new moon; these events rarely coincide. Although most of us do not anticipate such coincidences, Sohmer makes a powerful case for believing that the Elizabethans were highly sensitive to them. 1599 was a particularly tense year, Sohmer argues, because the 10 day discrepancy between England's Julian calendar and Europe's Gregorian calendar put the movable feasts into seemingly mocking juxtapositions. All England must have felt humiliated in 1599 when Europe's Easter, the 'real' Easter by Pope Gregory's scientifically validated calendar, fell on 11 April while in England, 10 days behind, it was All Fool's Day.

Sohmer's account of the ramifications of the calendrical discrepancy is fascinatingly detailed and he builds upon it with a second major insight: that the Bible was primarily an aural text for the Elizabethans. Attendance at church on Sundays and holy days was enforced by a systems of fines and the 1559 Act of Uniformity standardized not only the calendar but also the prayer book and the order of liturgical readings. Church readings from the Bible kept its words in people's minds and linked particular days with particular texts. Biblical allusions by Shakespeare would resonate loudly in the ears of his audience if, as Sohmer attempts to show for Julius Caesar, the date of performance was close to the day for which the prescribed scriptural reading contained the passages to which the drama alluded. The calendrical dislocation felt in England in 1599 is alluded to in Julius Caesar by repeated references to, and endemic confusion over, the date and the time. The historical Caesar had fixed the faulty republican calendar by adding 90 days to 46BC, causing tremendous confusion. The Folio text of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar has Brutus in his orchard asking "Is not to morrow (Boy) the first of March?" (TLN 658) but since the assassination takes place the next day, the ides (15th) of March, editors usually emend Brutus's "first" to "ides". After all, they argue, Brutus is unlikely to be 2 weeks adrift in his reckoning. Sohmer thinks that Brutus is meant to seem confused and he argues convincingly that editors should restore the Folio text which makes clear Shakespeare's allusion to calendrical disjunctions (p. 78).

Many readers will accept Sohmer's calendrical contextualization but find themselves unable to agree that the play also alludes heavily to the prescribed scriptural readings. Sohmer claims that Shakespeare's Julius Caesar was supposed to remind the audience of another JC, Jesus Christ. The received date of Christ's crucifixion was 25 March--hence the year number changed on that day--and 25 March by the Gregorian calendar was 15 March Julian, the ides. Historically aware audience members would have known that Caesar was abstemious, so Shakespeare's interpolated wine-sharing with his betrayers in 2.2 has struck scholars as a deliberate allusion to the Last Supper. But Sohmer finds an altogether more convoluted Biblical connection: the prescribed reading for the morning of the ides of March was John 2 describing the

marriage at Cana during which Christ turned water into wine (p. 27). This miracle was used by Catholics to defend their view of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Combining the calendrical discrepancy and the prescribed readings Sohmer is able to build a fabulously detailed reading of the play as a series of allusions to religious controversies of Shakespeare's time. However, one can almost hear fellow readers closing the book in disbelief when Sohmer claims that Portia's "Say I am merry" (TLN 1197) would have been "in Shakespeare's time . . . indistinguishable from 'Say I am Mary'" (p. 130).

Playing with numbers can become compulsive and Sohmer ought to have checked some of his ideas with bibliographers. While it is true that the Folio text runs to 2730 lines and that line 1366 "exactly begins the second half of the play. It reads simply, 'Enter Antony', it is quite wrong to argue that "Antony's entrance is either the precise midpoint of the text . . . or so close to the precise midpoint that its placement is unlikely to be happenstance" (p. 39). The line numbers in modern facsimiles of the Folio are the work of editors: the original had none and we cannot imagine that Shakespeare expected readers to count the lines in print versions of his plays in case there were patterns. Leaving aside possible relineation by compositors losing or saving space to correct for errors in casting off, Shakespeare would have known that the lengthy passages of prose he gave Casca in 1.2--which by definition are relined to fill the measure--would thwart any attempt to hit the line-numerical middle of the play in 3.1. Even if Shakespeare were able to exercise control over these variables in his lifetime--and we have no evidence that he did--the Folio typesetting occurred 7 years after his death.

The link between the main title and the subtitle of Sohmer's book--between Julius Caesar and the Globe--is made in his first chapter which is essentially the article published in Early Modern Literary Studies 3.1 (1997). Sohmer tries to show that 12 June Julian 1599 would have been a particularly apt day for the first performance of Julius Caesar and that the newly built Globe would have been the perfect venue. First Sohmer must dismiss the objection that, from the evidence of the Fortune contract, it took about 28 weeks to build a playhouse and that since the lease on the Globe site was not signed until 21 February 1599, the opening date must have fallen around the beginning of September 1599. The timbers for the Globe came from the Chamberlain's men previous home, the Theatre in Shoreditch, and the owner of that site, Giles Allen, began legal proceedings to have their removal declared illegal. Sohmer wrongly states that in his first suit Allen alleged that Peter Street, the Burbages' builder, removed the timbers of the Theatre on 28 December 1598 and that "Allen subsequently brought a second action against Street for trespass and ground damage" arising from a "foray on 20 January 1599 and a further extraction of timbers" (p. 3-4). In fact it was Allen's first suit which gave the date as 20 January 1599 and a counter-suit by the Burbages which gave the date 28 December 1598. The "further extraction", showing what Sohmer calls "discretion and prudence" never occurred: 20 January was the date Allen filed his complaint but the legal clerk mistakenly recorded it as the date of the alleged offence (Berry 1987, 6). Sohmer cites J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps's single-volume Life of Shakespeare as his source, but he must mean the same author's larger two-volume Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare. Herbert Berry's recent meticulous searches of the Public Record Office are not mentioned in his bibliography.

Despite the faulty account of its background, Sohmer is right to take 21 February 1599, the signing of the ground lease, as the terminus a quo of the Globe construction

project. The problem of getting the Globe built by 12 June still remains. Sohmer argues that the Globe would have taken less time to build than the Fortune because its timbers, recycled from the Theatre, did not need to be cut and shaped. If so, the Globe's construction schedule might be derived not from that of the Fortune but rather from that of the Hope playhouse, which Sohmer thinks was also built from recycled timbers, those of the old Beergarden. The contract for the building of the Hope allowed 13 weeks for the job (Greg 1907, 19-22) and Sohmer assumes that the Globe could have been built equally quickly and hence could have been completed by 3 June 1599. In fact the Globe project was quite unlike the Hope because the latter was to be built "neere or vppon the saide place, where the saide game place did heretofore stande" and this indicates that the original timbers were not recycled. Katherens was required to make a new building on roughly the spot where he should first tear the old one down. If the main timbers were to be reused--the timesaving shortcut Sohmer proposes--then their intricate joints would be preserved and the new building would have the same groundplan as the old one. There would be no point making new foundations in exactly the same shape as the old ones, so the foundations would be reused too. But Katherens's contract clearly allows him to choose his precise location ("neere or vppon the saide place"), which means he was free to make new foundations if he thought them desirable and this freedom indicates that he was not expected to recycle the main timbers. The Globe, on the other hand, was really just the Theatre reassembled on a new site and would have had precisely the same outline on the ground because its joints were preserved. The statement that the builder, Gilbert Katherens, could keep the recycled material from the old Beergarden appears at the end of the contract where the subject turns from what he must make (the dimensions and quality of the Hope's main frame) to what he will be paid for making it. The recycled timbers were part of the remuneration, not part of the specification, and hence the contract describes in detail the timbers Katherens must procure for the job. In each particular the Hope project was unlike the Globe and its contract does not indicate how long the Globe would have taken.

Still, Katherens was able to build the Hope in 13 weeks whereas the Fortune took more than twice as long. A likely explanation is that Katherens was beginning in the summer (the contract was signed on 29 August 1613) and so he could begin laying his foundations right away. Katherens subcontracted this work to the bricklayer John Browne on 8 September (Warner 1881, 241). The Fortune and the Globe were begun in the middle of winter and John Orrell noted that contemporary books on construction advise against laying foundations until the danger of frost is passed (Orrell 1993, 130-31, 131n18). Orrell conjectured that Street put off laying the Fortune's foundations until warm weather arrived and that he used the time from January to April to cut and shape the timbers. If Street followed the same practice a year earlier at the Globe then the advantage of having pre-cut timbers disappears since nothing could have been done with them until the spring. If, as Orrell thought, the weather played an important part in setting the completion date, then the Fortune contract gives a reasonable model for the Globe.

Sohmer's case for the 12 June opening would still be worth considering despite these objections if his evidence were fairly set out, but there are serious errors and omissions in this first chapter. Sohmer writes that "a sharp drop in his [Henslowe's] takings [at the Rose] occurred after 3 June" and suggests that this is "compatible with the arrival of a competitor" (p. 6). Referring to the complete absence of records of income as a sharp drop in takings is either to misrepresent the evidence or to imply

that the new playhouse so dominated the market that its competitor was entirely deprived of trade. Indeed the hiatus comes too early for Sohmer's purpose, since the first weekly statement of income which is missing was due on 10 June 1599, 2 days before the Globe opening which Sohmer claims is responsible for its absence. On this calendrical discrepancy Sohmer is silent. For Sohmer to be right, Henslowe must have anticipated defeat and preemptively closed the Rose; few theatres have ever received such favours from their competitors in advance of opening day. Elsewhere I have explored more plausible reasons for the gap in Henslowe's income, including Carol Chillington Rutter's hypothesis that the playing company kept the summer receipts (Egan 1999; Rutter 1984, 168). Sticking to his hypothesis that competition from the Globe closed the Rose, Sohmer asserts that "The Admiral's Men are known to have travelled extensively during the latter half of 1599", and supports this with a citation of Andrew Gurr's The Shakespearian Playing Companies. Gurr's source was the Records of Early English Drama project which has since reassigned the relevant records to another company (Egan 1999), but even in ignorance of this Sohmer's realization that Henslowe's receipts resumed on 6 October 1599 (p. 15n5) should have told him that the Admiral's men were not touring.

The connection between the 12 June opening of the Globe which Sohmer strives to establish and the calendrical controversy derives from the orientation of the stage towards the sun. 12 June was the summer solstice and on that day the sun would have risen at a point on the horizon towards which, John Orrell thought, the stage of the Globe was oriented. Orrell determined that Wenceslaus Hollar's preliminary sketch for his Long View of London was made with a precise optical instrument and that it showed the orientation of the fascia board of the stage cover to be 41.75 degrees west of north and hence the stage, presumed to be aligned with its cover, pointed 90 degrees clockwise from this, which is 48.25 degrees east of north (not "48.7 degrees north of east" as Sohmer has it, p. 10). Orrell thought that all the London playhouse stages pointed north-east but when the foundations of the Rose were uncovered in 1989 they showed that its stage pointed south-east. Sohmer asserts that "Recent archaeological excavations at the Globe site appear to confirm Orrell's deduction (Blatherwick and Gurr, 1992)" (pp. 10-11) but this is untrue. Blatherwick and Gurr's article makes no mention of the orientation of the stage, being concerned only with the possibility that what was excavated might be part of the foundations for the outer walls and for a stair turret (Blatherwick & Gurr 1992). A failure of logic compounds this error, as Sohmer thinks that winter-time planning to have their stage face the rising summer sun sent the players to consult their almanac "to determine this azimuth of sunrise", and in so doing ". . . they could not have failed to notice that a rare lunar-solar phenomenon was predicted for June 1599: a new Moon on the summer solstice" (p. 11). If, as Orrell thought, all the London stages faced the same way then there would have been no need for the almanac since they could have done what every erector of television aeriels does: copy the neighbours.

The misuse of Blatherwick and Gurr's article to support his assertion concerning the orientation of the stage is a serious flaw in Sohmer's book and it undermines everything which is built upon it. Scholars of the Globe and its reconstruction are likely to know that Orrell's hypothesis about the orientation of the stage has not been confirmed by the archaeological excavations, but other readers would be misled. The citation of authorities is not this book's strongest feature: at least one of the references ("Nelson 1997", p. 217) has no corresponding entry in the list of works cited. I counted 17 errors in the bibliography, one or more on every page, and although most were

minor they undermine the reader's confidence. I imagine that anyone who knows what "schauspiele" means would spot "schanspiele" as a misspelling, although in the same item, Gustav Binz's article on Thomas Platter, the date is also wrong and that might waste someone's afternoon in the library. I doubt "H. Bloom" will mind effortlessly acquiring co-authorship of Shakespeare's Politics, but Allan Bloom will probably mind losing it. Even Sohmer's article in Early Modern Literary Studies is wrongly cited. The cumulative effect of this sloppiness is to cast doubt on Sohmer's treatment of the Biblical allusions, which is a shame because he appears to be highly expert in this area and is quite possibly onto something important in relating daily Bible readings to performance texts.

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