showmen) and the customary auspices provided by local communities (as also perhaps in the case of the players at Herrick's Wake), is one of the many potentially fruitful areas in medieval theatre studies whose exploration is decisively facilitated by these two significant publications.

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Robin Headlam Wells. *Shakespeare, Politics and the State*. Context and Commentary Series. London: Macmillan, 1986. Pp. 174. Cloth \$29.95; paper \$9.95 (U.S.).

In part, this book sets out to counter the influence of the last generation of Shakespeare critics, especially E. M. W. Tillyard. However, if I were compelled to choose between Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* and Robin Headlam Wells's *Shakespeare, Politics and the State* as a way of introducing students to the "political" Shakespeare, I would certainly adopt the former. For all the limitations time has visited on it and in spite of its arch-conservatism and dogmatism, Tillyard's book has nevertheless one telling advantage over Wells's: *Shakespeare's History Plays* takes Shakespearean politics seriously; *Shakespeare, Politics and the State* does not.

The "Context and Commentary" series is directed towards undergraduate students; the general editor of the series recommends the benefits of an approach that seeks "to intermingle history and literature in the conviction that the study of each is enhanced thereby" (ix); the volumes are sturdily produced, reasonably priced, and nicely illustrated (this one with six black-and-white plates). This volume is sensibly divided into topical chapters, each devoted to an important issue in the political debates of the Elizabethan age - "Civilisation and the Debate on Human Nature," "Forms of Government," "The Just Ruler," "Rebellion," "Providence and History," and "Natural Law." The book's agenda has to a degree been set by the Tillyardian approach that Wells is criticizing, but the division is thoughtful and clear and will help students organize their own thoughts. Most of the quotations derive from political thinkers such as Jean Bodin, Thomas Starkey, Justus Lipsius, Erasmus, Hooker, and James I. Machiavelli and Montaigne are under-represented, and Bacon does not even get a mention. Very few quotations are from literary works outside Shakespeare. The quotations are very often interesting in themselves, but it is seldom apparent precisely how we are to use them in order to enhance our understanding of Shakespeare. Some quotations are inapposite and misleading: Gaspar Contarini's praise of the Venetian constitution is made to suggest a large-scale parallel between Othello's (apparently) two-sided nature on the one hand and the conflict between Venice and the Turks on the other: "While Othello struggles to control the darker side of his nature the same battle between civilisation and unreason is enacted on a larger scale in the war between Venice and the Turks" (58). In another chapter, Thomas Starkey's radical suggestion that Parliament be entitled to seize rule in the

event of royal misbehaviour is set beside the new Henry V's moving renunciation of his former wildness (66-67).

Part of the problem might lie in the design of the series. In this volume, "context" - the long quotations from various works of contemporary with Shakespeare - outweighs "commentary" - the author's explanations of the relationships between texts - by about three or four to one. As a consequence, it is impossible for the author to formulate any kind of sustained argument or exposition. The text is distressingly uneven, transitions are either abrupt or non-existent, and chapter-conclusions seem to come out of nowhere.

The Shakespeare evoked in this book is too wishy-washy to be in any way engaging. Henry V, for example, is neither a tyrant nor a Christian king (or perhaps not): "Must we then assume that Shakespeare is writing with sustained and bitter irony in his portrayal of Henry....The answer is probably no: the overall tone of the play does not support such a view. What is clear, however, from a study of the historical context in which plays like *Henry V* were written is the complexity of Shakespeare's response to political questions. Above all he is a relentless critic of sentimental self-deception. *Henry V* contains some wonderfully stirring rhetoric; but the play does not allow us to forget the cruel and sometimes futile realities of war" (77). Here either the author must make up his mind between the two conventional views of Shakespeare's Henry V or he must try to explain what artistic and political conditions compelled Shakespeare to be so Janus-faced in his depiction of Henry V.

On the whole, the Shakespeare who emerges from this book seems unexcited about politics. He is neither conservative nor radical, neither royalist nor republican; we are told - correctly - that he is not a political propagandist, that "he is interested in human beings caught up in the drama of power" (61), that he "avoided controversy" (126), and that the manner of his handling of political questions is "typically oblique and elusive" (160). A man such as this is likely to have fallen into a doze at the deposition-trial of Richard II. Instructors desirous of their students' engagement with the "political" Shakespeare would be better off with a livelier book.

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Collected Works of Erasmus Volume 27 & 28, Literary and Educational Writings 5 & 6, ed. A. H. T. Levi. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1986.

These two volumes of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* contain the most important and widely-read of the great humanist's satires, with clear and accurate English translations based on the most recent textual studies, and generally excellent introductions. As with any composite work, there are problems for the reader, who must do a great deal of flipping back and forth to understand it all, but the general