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Review of "Replaying the Renaissance: Essays on Shakespeare, Jonson, and Others." Arnold Preussner. Kirskville, MO: Naciketas Press, 2010.

Andrew Vorder Bruegge
Winthrop University, vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu

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Replaying the Renaissance: Essays on Shakespeare, Jonson, and Others. Arnold Preussner. Kirskville, MO: Naciketas Press, 2010. 400 pp. n.p. ISBN 978-0-9817902-2-0.

REVIEWED BY: Andrew Vorder Bruegge, Winthrop University

This text is at once a retrospective of Arnold Preussner's career as a scholar and a survey of Elizabethan literature. The majority of the content focuses on Elizabethan dramatic literature between 1590 and 1635, organized in six parts: the first three cover the title topics, while the remaining three include discussions of important nondramatic works, connections between the cinema and Elizabethan drama, and a medley of Shakespearean production reviews. The author writes primarily about comedy. Preussner, who died in June 2010 after a long battle with cancer, was primarily a literary scholar by training, but *Replaying the Renaissance* consistently gives emphasis to performative aspects of the scripts as they are discussed. Several essays address literary pedagogy. Each concludes with a list of works cited, but there is no index or compiled bibliography.

Preussner's introductory chapter gives the reader superb guidance about how to approach the unique content that will follow. As the book bundles a wide range of essays, presentation papers, reviews, and scholarly articles written across several decades, he acknowledged that it confronts the reader with an unusual critical experience. The strong, single voice of the author offers a consistent vocabulary, core of critical sources, and interpretive viewpoint. Preussner cautioned, though, that the brevity of each entry can sometimes leave the reader craving more intellectual/analytical depth. Patience is rewarded, however, for the reading of the multiple essays about a single drama (*Twelfth Night*, for

example), generates a broader, more sophisticated argument. In this way the reader comes to recognize both Preussner's mastery of the subject matter and his liberality as a critic. *Replaying the Renaissance* is written concretely and succinctly, with concise thesis statements guiding Preussner's essays from the top. While he learned to deploy the vocabulary of postmodernism, he was not lost in that dense rhetoric.

In the first three sections, the reader can detect a couple of critical motifs weaving through Preussner's writings—the narrative structure of festive comedy, Northrop Frye's seminal analysis of comedy, and Shakespeare as the measuring stick for all other dramatists. There are strong whiffs of bardology throughout the text, particularly in the essays on Jonson and other dramatists where the author inevitably links and compares them (slightly) to Shakespeare. With a bardologist's enthusiasm, Preussner credits Shakespeare with important innovations that shaped all drama of the Jacobean/Caroline epoch. Scholars whose tastes run in more Marlovian, Jonsonian, or Chapmanesque veins might feel that Preussner occasionally overreached with his assertions of Shakespeare's primacy.

Part 4 features essays about nondramatic works. Only one of these essays attempts to draw connections between drama and poetry; hence this entire section seems out of place in the book. Part 5 offers inspired discussion of some very good pedagogical ideas. It shows how to use popular films to illuminate structural and character elements in Shakespeare's comedies. Preussner describes class exercises, discussions, and assignments that are intended to reveal to students Shakespeare's skill as a writer of compelling narratives. These are concrete, specific recipes for engaging students in the classroom, and any educator can readily adapt them to her/his situation. The final section offers an interesting collage of production reviews written about a variety of Shakespeare festivals. Because Preussner was such an accomplished expert on Shakespeare, he could give very detailed analyses—focusing on specific moments and lines (and even the cutting of lines) in any production. While each review in isolation has a narrow scope and limited significance, the reader perceives broader interpretive value when considering the entire collection. Only by Preussner's decision to bring all these reviews together can the reader perceive some interesting insights. First, *A Winter's Tale* receives many more productions than one would expect, for several reviews of productions are included. As Preussner observed in several places, the immortal characters and solid comic action in that play make it an audience favorite. Second, we detect ambivalence in the author's tone about marketing trends at these festivals. He laments the tendency in productions to foreground Renaissance Fair-style entertainment gimmicks (sword swallowing and fire eating, for example). He suggests that this trend shortchanges the substantial intellectual content of the dramas. It comes as no surprise that a Shakespeare scholar such as Preussner would feel this way. In all fairness, Preussner balances this view with commentary that generously concedes the theatrical power of Shakespeare in performance.

Generally speaking, this book confirms the value of compiling a single scholar's writings together in one tome. Such a work honors the author and provides fellow students of the subject a useful resource and an inspiring guide to emulate.

