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Review of Antonia Southern, *Player, Entrepreneur and Philanthropist: The Story of Edward Alleyn, 1566-1626*

Edward Alleyn was a towering figure of the Elizabethan stage – literally, deploying his exceptionally tall stature in what contemporaries called ‘stalking and roaring’ performances. One of the thrills for present-day visitors to the archaeological remains of the Rose playhouse, just round the corner from the Globe reconstruction on London’s Bankside, is the visible outline of the very stage on which Alleyn embodied the iconoclastic anti-heroes of Christopher Marlowe. His sensational roles ranged from the ruthless conqueror Tamburlaine – in the playwright’s words, ‘Threat’ning the world with high astounding terms / And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword’ – to the necromancer Doctor Faustus, who sells his soul to the Devil and is dragged off to hell. One of the many fascinating facts to be learned from Antonia Southern’s new biography is just how young Alleyn was when he created these innovative roles and participated in the invention of English Renaissance drama. He was only twenty-one when he played Tamburlaine, by which time he had already been an actor for at least five years.

Ten years of success and acclaim followed, but in 1597 Alleyn retired from the stage to pursue his burgeoning parallel career as an entrepreneur. He returned for a few years in the early 1600s as leader and manager of the company at the new Fortune playhouse, and in 1604 appeared as the Genius (or presiding spirit) of the City at the magnificent pageants to welcome the new king James I to London (delayed for a year after the accession by an outbreak of plague). However, this was his last public performance, a fitting end to his acting career as he personified the city in whose new, dynamic, world-changing cultural medium – commercial theatre – he had played a leading role.

Alleyn now turned his full attention to his business interests. In 1592 he had married Joan Woodward, endearingly addressed in his letters as his 'mouse'. As well as being an affectionate union, this was an astute professional move, since Joan's step-father was the leading theatrical impresario Philip Henslowe, whose partner Alleyn became in many financial ventures. Southern provides an arresting chapter on their lucrative involvement in bull- and bear-baiting, spectacles at least as popular as play-going in the period. We may struggle to understand how audiences who appreciated Shakespeare also flocked to see celebrity bears such as Harry Hunks and George Stone being tied to a stake and viciously attacked by dogs. Southern points out that the dogs often came off worse, but whoever won, it was hardly an edifying spectacle.

Also unedifying, as Southern acknowledges, were Alleyn's legal manoeuvres against Henslowe's family in contested claims on his estate after his death in 1616. But while Alleyn's conduct in this affair was questionable, he dedicated his substantial wealth to a worthy cause: the founding of the College of God's Gift, known today as Dulwich College, in 1619. This quatercentenary provides an occasion for Southern's biography, and will give it special interest for readers with a personal connection with the school. Alleyn's original foundation was a 'hospital' – at that time, a general term for a charitable institution – not only for twelve poor scholars, but also for twelve pensioners over the age of fifty, six male and six female. The almshouses that housed them were relatively comfortable, but discipline was strict: pensioners had to be celibate and sober, and do chores in the College; they could keep cats, but not dogs or poultry. Alleyn was deeply committed to the project and expended vast sums upon it, including £10,000 on speculative land-purchases in Dulwich long before the feasibility of the enterprise was established. As Southern writes, the realization of his vision involved not only 'years of planning and thinking' but also 'courage, bordering on recklessness.' As well as seeing the big

picture, Alleyn also took a close personal interest in all details of College life, including the timetable for the school day (starting at 6am, with a break at 9.30am for bread and beer), and the cost of shoes and haircuts for the boys.

Southern sometimes goes into details of Alleyn's legal and financial affairs which might be of most interest to the specialist reader; yet some relevant recent works of scholarship are missing from the Bibliography. There are a few typographical oddities, such as the centring on the page of verse-quotations (rather than the usual convention of aligning them to the left, to show metrical variations). Overall, though, this enjoyable and informative book is a fitting sequel to Southern's biography of Nathan Field, *Player, Playwright and Preacher's Kid* (2009), as once again she enhances our knowledge of a significant figure on the early modern dramatic scene. Readers will appreciate the clarity with which she traces Alleyn's intertwined careers, and her vivid recreation of the cultural contexts that shaped his life and personality.