

Shakespeare and Feminist Theory

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This volume on Shakespeare and Feminist Theory is a clear and accessible addition to the excellent Arden Shakespeare and Theory series. It is aimed on the one hand at university students of Shakespeare, or students of literature in general, who are interested in the ways in which feminist theory might illuminate analysis of the plays and, on the other, at university lecturers interested in integrating a module on feminist approaches to Shakespeare or even creating courses in Shakespeare and feminist theory. It is certainly a topical volume considering the range of feminist demands currently in the public sphere, from demands for greater representation and a highlighting of questions of sexual assault in the film industry to demands for equal pay for work of equal value across various sectors of the economy. *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory* does not explicitly mention these movements, but it does help to contextualize and theorise them and to apply feminist insights to representations of gender in Shakespeare's plays.

The theoretical approach adopted in the book stresses the variety of feminist theories, from psychoanalysis to new historicism and cultural materialism to queer theory. It emphasizes the fact that much contemporary feminist theory combines different approaches rather than locating itself exclusively in one of these fields and points to new developments such as the expanding critical literature on race and gender in Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the volume privileges a critical tension between "equality feminism" and "difference feminism". This is evident in the title of the first chapter "Likeness and Difference" which focuses on the ways in which women in Shakespeare might be seen as like or different from men and which gives the greatest impression of keying into a live debate. Missing from the initial overview of feminist theories in the

Introduction is a discussion of feminism and presentism and feminist materialism criticism is aligned somewhat uncomfortably with equality feminism throughout the volume, but Novy's focus on diversity within feminist theory and on a certain pragmatic combining of insights from different feminist theories is a useful way to introduce the discussion of the plays in the following chapters.

Besides the initial chapter on likeness and difference, there are also chapters on desire, marriage, motherhood, language, relations between women and work. The discussions of marriage and motherhood are the chapters that focus most on the ways in which women's experience in Shakespeare is unlike that of men while the remaining chapters examine more of the likenesses. Although the separation between desire and marriage might be questioned as somewhat heteronormative, the chapter on desire does highlight the strength of the attachment of Emilia to Flavia in *Two Noble Kinsmen* as "a past relationship with another woman, which could equally be called friendship or love" (45) and the emphasis on the demonization of adulterous desire makes clear that marriage in Shakespeare does not mean the end of desire. The chapter on language contains interesting examples of editing and performance choices and their consequences, although those who work with non-Anglophone Shakespeares will miss attention to the ways in which translation choices also have feminist consequences and there is very little discussion of the feminist rewritings of Shakespeare about which Novy has herself written in *Transforming Women: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (2000). I found the chapter on work particularly stimulating, ranging from those women working in and around the theatre in the early modern period to women such as Portia and Olivia who run their own households to those working in the sex trade in *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles*.

Each chapter begins with a useful set of questions that guide the discussion of the plays that follows, blending theory and practical examples in a coherent and insightful way. In terms of the plays chosen, there is great sensitivity to the ways in which differences in genre influence representations of gender. Evidently the more positive representation of women in the comedies and their more complex

positive treatment in the romances contrasts greatly with their demonization and marginalization in the tragedies and histories. Several plays are dealt with in more than one chapter. These include *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Henry VI* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Discussion of the latter argues for an overwhelmingly positive representation of Cleopatra, but this does downplay the racist and sexist ways in which she is discussed and the ways in which the play frames her as unworthy of trust, unpredictable and manipulative. *Hamlet* is surprisingly absent from the volume, especially in the chapter on motherhood where Gertrude might seem an obvious case to discuss.

The overall impression given by the book of the relationship between Shakespeare and feminist theory is one of diversity and multiplicity. This renders generalization ineffective and counter-productive, for what unites Goneril in *King Lear*, Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Margaret in *2Henry VI*? The plurality of approaches to the presence or absence of women in Shakespeare is certainly the book's greatest strength, leaving the reader also with a sense not only of the tension between equality and difference but also of the differences between women themselves in terms of age, class, race, sexuality and nation.