

Shakespeare and Women

By Phyllis Rackin

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

Reviewer: Valerie Wayne

In her concise, accessible, and important book, Phyllis Rackin shows us where feminist criticism of Shakespeare needs to go: not to laments about women's oppression but to discoveries of historical empowerment; not to texts and interpretations that reinforce patriarchy and misogyny but to those that resist it; not to timeless women but to women understood in relation to time, place, and circumstance. Rackin's concern is more with where feminist criticism is taking us than with where it has been, and her book moves us forward to a better place. Carefully organized and lucidly argued, it offers a fresh, energizing account of its subject and reminds us we have a choice about how we view history, texts, and ourselves. Since Shakespeare's writing "still has an authority unequalled by any other secular texts," many want to claim that authority for their own beliefs and opinions. However, "for women . . . what matters is not what Shakespeare thought and felt about us, but what the words he wrote enable us to think and feel about ourselves" (111). The book sees texts and authors in relation to their effects upon living persons, rejecting critical approaches that teach women to read from the subject position of misogynist men and affirming our ability to find the historical evidence we are looking for to create a history in which women have a meaningful and major part to play.

The first two chapters work as a pair, with the first explaining the kind of history we need but don't have because of an overemphasis on women's oppression, and the second serving as an example of the new history we can develop. Attending to Mary Arden and her family, to what we do and don't know about Anne Hathaway, to early modern women's importance as laborers and housekeepers and their participation in off-stage theatrical activities as well as their presence in the audience, this second chapter paints a different picture of Shakespeare's Stratford and London. On the topic of

the exclusion of women from the English stage, which was anomalous in the larger context of Europe, Rackin posits that the professional companies "seemed to have exploited that anomaly in an effort to establish their business on a respectable footing" (43) in a culture that viewed theatrical impersonation with suspicion and traveling players as having low social status. Although this chapter could say a good deal more about the women who were writing at the same time as Shakespeare, it does propose that some of those anonymous plays may have been written by women, and it affirms the importance of female patrons for the London companies. As for members of the audience, "the collective economic power [women] possessed as paying customers in the playhouse meant that none of Shakespeare's plays could have been successful in his own time if it failed to please them" (47). When was the last time you read such an affirmation of women's cultural influence? Could one make the same statement about cultural phenomena today?

Chapter 3 argues that the plays we choose to read, study, and perform "tell us more about our own assumptions regarding women than about the beliefs that informed the responses of Shakespeare's first audiences" (49). These choices contribute to the greater estimation of *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* as compared to all three parts of *Henry VI*, *King John*, and *Henry VIII*, where female characters are more prominent; to the emphasis on *The Tempest* in contrast to the other late romances; and to *Hamlet* as compared to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Our preoccupation with the "crudely misogynist story" (53) of *The Taming of the Shrew* may also explain that play's exceptional popularity, which "seems to prefigure the most oppressive modern assumptions about women and to validate those assumptions as timeless truths" (54), especially when the induction is cut in performance. In place of *Shrew*, Rackin proposes we reconsider *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the only Shakespearean comedy set in contemporary England, which demystifies male sexual insecurity by presenting Falstaff as "a beached whale, helplessly gasping on a shore he cannot navigate" (67), and offers female characters exercising power in their own persons as women.

In her next chapter, "Boys will be Girls," Rackin discusses cross-dressing, not by focusing on the women in the comedies, but by taking a long look at Cleopatra as epitomizing the paradox of theatrical representation. In "The Lady's Reeking Breath" she takes up the sonnets, showing that Shakespeare critiqued the essential nar-

cissism of Petrarchan conventions in remarks by the Dauphin and the Bastard in *King John* (2.1.497–510), that *Romeo and Juliet* stages a “complicated negotiation with the Petrarchan tradition” (99), and that the tradition was entirely consistent with misogyny, women’s silence, and the devaluation of women’s bodies. Then she provides a wonderful reading of sonnet 130, where the lady’s reeking breath becomes her speaking voice, and her solid corporeality as she “treads on the ground” transforms her to an “active human presence” (109). The force of this reading almost overtakes the chapter, but Rackin repositions its sentiments as so “strikingly atypical . . . that they do not, therefore, provide any basis for claiming Shakespeare as a feminist *avant la lettre*” (110).

The last chapter critiques the ways in which Shakespeare’s female characters have served as models of an unchanging female nature. The case is made largely by comparing Lady Macbeth with the Scotswomen in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, which leads to a discussion of the early modern controversy over women breast-feeding their own children. Shakespeare’s anachronistic rendering of an old story is seen to restrict women “to a private, domestic sphere, defined by their ‘natural’ vocation as wives and mothers, which was to become a leading feature of modernity” although it was new at the time (134). There is some dissonance between this chapter, given its comments on the paucity of devoted mothers or good marriages in the plays, and the book’s claim in its last sentence that “the women we see in his plays are inevitably limited by the range of possibilities we can imagine for ourselves” (137). Much of the book confirms that observation, but the chapter also points out the limitations present in the texts themselves, which could become an argument for reading beyond Shakespeare to his contemporaries, including women writers, and beyond all of them to other times and places. Nonetheless, Rackin consistently takes the difficult route of focusing on Shakespeare’s texts that feminist criticism has undervalued or ignored, slighting the comedies and youthful heroines for the female characters of greater complexity and experience, confronting directly the problems posed by characters and passages most troubling to women readers. She writes with the urgency of someone who knows firsthand, as many of us do, how intensely these texts can affect our sense of ourselves as women, and she is committed to improving our critical practice as a way of improving the directions we chart for ourselves. This teachable book—for undergraduates as well as graduate students, with helpful suggestions

for further reading at the end—deserves a wide and diverse audience. It challenges us to develop a criticism that is less concerned with making Shakespeare's texts look better, more complex, or more historical, than with making the world a better place in which to read—anything.

The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural Poetics of Translation

By Michael Wyatt

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005

Reviewer: Ian Frederick Moulton

Michael Wyatt's *Italian Encounter with Tudor England* opens with the description of England in John Florio's *Firste Fruites* (London, 1578), a book of Italian-English dialogues. Wyatt asks his reader to imagine what it would have been like for an Italian merchant to arrive in London in the late 1570s, speaking no English. According to Florio, he would have found himself in a country where the air is clear and the women are beautiful, where food is plentiful and good (though everyone prefers beer to wine), but also where *la gente vanno vestiti con gran pompa* ("the people go well appareled with great pomp") and *il denaro regge ogni cosa* ("money ruleth all things"). Other Italian accounts note the extraordinary social freedom enjoyed by Englishwomen, and our imaginary visitor might well have been surprised by the early modern English custom of kissing hello. He would also have found a small, but thriving Italian community, including merchants and court musicians. Best of all, Florio claims, the queen looks fondly on Italians and their culture: *si diletta di parlar con loro elegantissime* ("delightes she to speak with them eloquently").

Much has been written on the influence of Italian culture in sixteenth-century England. But Wyatt's book is something new: an engaging, if at times diffuse, examination of the contact between

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