



Pearson
Edexcel

A level English Literature

Shakespeare Critical
Anthology:
Shakespeare and
Diversity

Issue 1





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Using this Additional Critical Anthology

This Critical Anthology is not intended to replace, but rather to supplement the current Shakespeare Critical Anthologies on [Tragedy](#) and [Comedy](#). As such, it adheres to the principles set out in the original Critical Anthologies and so some reiteration of these principles is warranted here.

At the heart of our A level Literature qualification are literary texts, and A level depends upon the careful reading and re-reading of these. The study of Literature at A level, however, also requires you to read widely, deeply and independently to secure informed views about these texts. Reading critically means not just having opinions but understanding how and why other readers might think differently.

This collection of critical passages is designed to approach the reading of Shakespeare through lenses of diversity:

- gender
- sexuality
- ethnicity
- disability.

The critical views contained here will offer you a range of ways of considering Shakespeare, some general in their application, others related to specific set texts.

The texts have been selected to give you a taste of high-quality writing by literary critics about texts that you should know well. You and your teachers may wish to supplement them with other passages of criticism that you find illuminating, but this is not essential. We hope that your own critical writing style will be enriched by reading, and sometimes grappling with, these pieces. The arguments posed will enable you to consider the views of others and form, and perhaps re-assess, your own readings of Shakespeare.

There can be difficulties when reading texts using ‘politically-inflected’ critical lenses, especially when such lenses engage with sensitive topics or issues of diversity. There is always the potential under such circumstances that the proverbial cart can come before the horse. There is, in other words, the danger that rather than the critical approach being used as a means of unlocking new dimensions of the literary text (in this case Shakespeare), the text is instead used as a kind of ‘rubber stamp’ to ‘support’ the ideas the critic wishes to present.

This ‘health warning’ given, critical approaches related to issues of diversity provide audiences, readers and students with a variety of interesting and insightful ways of engaging with Shakespeare some 400 years after his death. The world has not stood still, but Shakespeare continues to play an integral part not only in literary education, but also in the cultural life of the UK and, indeed, the world as a whole. His continued presence ‘on the stage’ demonstrates the extent to which succeeding generations have continued to find in his work material that is both relevant and critically important to their lives, and the materials in this critical anthology are testimony to that fact.



So how might you use literary criticism within A level English Literature? This will vary from student to student, depending on your developing skills in the subject. There is no expectation for you to pepper your own responses to Shakespeare with quotations from the Critical Anthologies, or to ensure that a set percentage of your essay references this material. The intention is that your own responses to Shakespeare's writing will be enriched by considering the range of viewpoints offered here. Think of the perspectives offered here not as 'the answer' to reading Shakespeare, but merely as another reading of the text for you to engage with. You will certainly notice that literary critics do not always agree with each other.

All of the points below are valuable ways of using the extended reading offered in this collection – during class discussion, in personal essays, or ultimately in your examination responses:

- understand the interpretation being put forward about the literary text(s).
- compare the critic's position with your own reading of the text (or indeed that of another critic or a member of your class). Identify any points of connection or difference
- agree with the point made. Identify further evidence in Shakespeare's text to extend it.
- disagree with the critic's position. Identify evidence in Shakespeare's text that might support your opposing argument
- refine the critic's position. Identify one element that you can support and another that you would prefer to refine and qualify with evidence from the text
- select particular quotations that support or contrast with your own reading of the text to strengthen your discussion or literary essay.

It is not possible in a volume of this sort, of course, to cover all texts and all schools of thought, but the materials here provide a useful body of material from which to start thinking in critical terms about Shakespeare in relation to a variety of diversity issues.

We hope that you find these materials interesting and useful.



Coverage by Text and Topic

Topic: Historicist and presentist readings of Shakespeare

Text	Source
General	Howard, J. E., & O'Connor, M. F. (Eds.) 'Shakespeare reproduced: The text in history and ideology'.
General	'Introduction', Hawkes, T. <i>Shakespeare in the Present</i> .

Topic: Gender

Text	Source
General	Penelope Freedman 'Shakespeare and Gender'.
<i>Hamlet</i>	Jillian Luke 'What if the Play Were Called <i>Ophelia</i> '.
<i>Othello</i>	Breyan Strickler 'Sex in the City: An Ecocritical Perspective on the Place of Gender and Race in <i>Othello</i> '.
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	Manon Turban 'A creature that did bear the shape of man': hybridity and gender in <i>Measure for Measure</i> '.
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Terence Hawkes 'Or' in <i>Meaning by Shakespeare</i> .



Topic: Sexuality

Text	Source
Measure for Measure	Mario Digangi 'Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in Measure for Measure'.
Hamlet	Lee Edelman 'Hamlet's Wounded Name' in <i>Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare</i> , ed. Madhavi Menon .
Twelfth Night	Joseph Pequigney 'The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in Twelfth Night.

Topic: Ethnicity

Text	Source
General	Ruben Espinosa 'Diversifying Shakespeare'.
<i>Othello</i>	Karen Newman "And wash the Ethiop white": femininity and the monstrous in <i>Othello</i> '.
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	Theodora J. Jankowski's review of Carol Chillington Rutter's <i>Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage</i> .

Topic: Disability

Text	Source
King Lear	Christine M. Gottlieb "'Unaccommodated Man": Dismodernism and Disability Justice in King Lear'.
Twelfth Night	Alice Equestri ' This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen': Feste, Lear's Fool and the border between 'idiocy' and mental illness'.



Texts and criticism coverage

Play – tragedy	Gender	Sexuality	Ethnicity	Disability
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>			x	
<i>Hamlet</i>	x	x		x
<i>King Lear</i>				x
<i>Othello</i>	x		x	

Play – comedy	Gender	Sexuality	Ethnicity	Disability
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	x			
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	x	x		
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	x			
<i>Twelfth Night</i>		x		x



Section A: Historicist and Presentist readings of Shakespeare

Any consideration of diversity, whether it be related to Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity or Disability inevitably brings to the fore the tensions that exist between **presentist** and **historicist** readings of Shakespeare. This is in many respects a good thing, as it encourages students to see that literary texts are not subject to singular interpretations, nor do interpretations remain static and immovable over time. Although it is not used in this anthology, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now* (eds Di Pietro and Grady, 2014) provides a very good basis for establishing the contingent nature of interpretation, thus knocking on the head any unhelpful notions of the ‘universality’ and ‘timelessness’ of Shakespeare’s works. Indeed, there is much to be said for exploring critical extracts relating to diversity issues which are not focused on any specific text(s); these can serve to encourage more diverse thinking about how Shakespeare signifies in the world or they might engage more specifically with broad areas such as genre. Catherine Belsey’s *Why Shakespeare?* (2007) is useful in both these respects.

Glossary

presentist – readings that are created using the terms and mores of the time at which the reading occurs (i.e., in the reader’s ‘present’).

historicist – readings that are created using the terms and mores of the time at which the text was produced (i.e., in the author’s time).



1. Shakespeare reproduced: The text in history and ideology.

Howard & Connor challenge the idea that Shakespeare can and should be seen as 'universal' in his meaning. Such an idea, they argue, is 1) to limit the range of human experience by reducing our sense of what it means to be human, and 2) our understanding of Shakespeare's work as literature which must, by its very nature, remain open to a plurality of readings.

Probably more than any other figure in western culture, Shakespeare has been used to secure assumptions about texts, history, ideology, and criticism He functions, in many quarters, as a kind of cultural **Esperanto**, a medium through which the differences of material existence — differences of race, gender, class, history, and culture — are supposedly cancelled. He is repeatedly presented as the writer who transcends such differences to get at the abiding truths of human existence, as 'not for an age, but for all time'. Claims about Shakespeare as the bearer of universal truths serve an oppressive function when they render illegitimate readings produced outside the **dominant ideologies** which secure a society's understanding of what the true is. As feminists and Third World critics, among others, have suggested, when texts are said to speak for humankind, humankind often shrinks radically to include only those within a traditional pale of privilege. [It is important] ... to question claims of Shakespeare's universality and to reveal ways in which historically specific factors determine the 'Shakespeare' produced in criticism, in the classroom, and on the stage. Accompanying the contention that Shakespeare depicts a universal and unchanging human nature are often two further claims: first, that the meaning of a Shakespearean text is **ineluctably** in that text (and consequently never changes); and second, that the Shakespearean text resides in an aesthetic zone above ideology. One stark link among these claims is their avoidance of history. To posit an unchanging meaning in texts, waiting to be found by 'good' readers, is to deny the **historicity** of the reading and theatrical practices through which a plural and opaque text is rendered variously intelligible at different historical moments and from different interested positions within the social formation. Similarly, to posit a category of self-evidently literary works, somehow above ideology, is to ignore the historicity of the very category of the literary, the way, that is, different works fall within that category at



different historical moments. Such a move essentializes what is socially constructed; and it arbitrarily places outside the arena of social contest certain pieces of writing and certain acts of reading. Again, the ideological function of such claims is to allow local and particular constructions of Shakespeare to enjoy the privilege of natural and unchanging truths, uncontaminated by the 'merely' political or parochial.

Glossary

Esperanto – a constructed language invented by L.L Zamenhof in 1887, intended to become a global medium of communication.

dominant ideologies – the ideologies and beliefs that are the most powerful and significant within a society.

ineluctably – undeniably and uniquely.

historicity – historical authenticity.

Source: 'Shakespeare reproduced: The text in history and ideology ', Howard, J. E., & O'Connor, M. F. (Eds.), Routledge 2005.



2. Shakespeare in the Present.

Hawkes asks us to reconsider the factors affecting contemporary readings of Shakespeare and to think again about how the present (and presentist readings) must be part of developing appropriate 21st century views of Shakespeare and historicism.

Currently prominent amongst [critical approaches] is one that urges us to read the plays ‘historically’: to reinsert them into the context in which they first came to be, and on which, it’s said, their intelligibility depends. Our aim for Shakespeare should be to ‘restore Shakespeare’s artistry to the earliest conditions of its realisation...’ and to ‘restore his works to the specific imaginative and material circumstances in which they were written and engaged’. Only when we do this, can we hope to confront **the Bard’s** ‘historical specificity’.

Of course, if the alternative is to deal with plays in blissful ignorance of their historical context, to impose on them, as many teachers unthinkingly seem to do, some kind of absurd contemporaneity with ourselves, usually justified by windy rhetoric about the Bard’s ‘universality’, then perhaps historical specificity of some sort is an acceptable antidote. However, that kind of artlessness doesn’t seem to be the main target. One of the biggest obstacles to reading Shakespeare historically ... is ‘theory’. Theory’s stress on the critic’s ‘situatedness’ in the present results in a self-regarding focus that irrevocably contaminates any contact with the past. Only if we confront the plays’ texts in terms, not of the critic’s present situation, but of the ‘actual conditions of their production and reception’, stressing both their ‘particularity and contingency’, can we defeat the Bard’s most sinister enemy. Its name is ‘presentism’.

The principal **talisman** capable of warding off this spectre is called ‘facts’: facts about specific historical conditions that have determined the reading and writing of literature, facts about the material circumstances of literary production, facts about how books and playscripts were actually produced, sold and received. Retrieved and analysed by the scholar, these facts will lay bare, not the author’s unique meaning, concealed within the text, but the extent to which the text itself speaks of ‘the corporate activities that have brought it into being’.



All well and good, but — a matter of tone — what does that reiterated ‘restore’ imply? Does it hint at the recovery of a lost purity, of a final arrival at truth-revealing origins, of the Restoration at last of the genuine monarchy of genius, even of a more fundamental confrontation, no longer in a glass, darkly, but now face to face? It’s true that a looming, obtrusive present would certainly blur the outlines of any **Grail** worth grasping. And if the aim of historical scholarship were simply to establish ‘how it really was’ ... then the present can only be an intervening, distracting fog that needs to be pierced or blown away. But the present’s relation to the past is surely a subtler matter than that. All restorations face one major problem. Reaching backwards, they can’t afford to examine the position in the present from which that manoeuvre is undertaken. As a result, they discount the nature of the choosing and the omission, the selections and suppressions that determine it. Yet to avoid the pitfall by taking one’s present situation fully into account seems inevitably to compromise the project. Genuinely to capture, or repeat, the past is of course fundamentally impossible for a variety of other reasons. In fact, the attempt to do so ... usually risks an engagement, not with sameness, but with the very motive forces that produce difference. Restoration may aim to be the thief of time, but it’s a notoriously unsuccessful one.

For none of us can step beyond time. It can’t be drained out of our experience. As a result, the critic’s own ‘situatedness’ does not — cannot — contaminate the past. In effect, it constitutes the only means by which it’s possible to see the past and perhaps comprehend it. And since we can only see the past through the eyes of the present, few serious historians would deny that the one has a major influence on their account of the other. Of course we should read Shakespeare historically. But given that history results from a never-ending dialogue between past and present, how can we decide whose historical circumstances will have priority in that process, Shakespeare’s, or our own?

Glossary

the Bard – Shakespeare

talisman – an object with magical powers thought to bring good luck

Grail – the chalice that supposedly contained the blood of Jesus Christ (i.e. a very desirable object)

Source: ‘Shakespeare in the Present’, Terence Hawkes, Routledge



Section B: Gender-based Readings

1. Shakespeare and Gender

Freedman introduces a nuanced way of thinking about feminist readings of Shakespeare and how these have developed.

‘Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.’ (**Virginia Woolf**, ***A Room of One’s Own***. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945, p. 37)

Consideration of gender issues in Shakespeare over the past twenty-five years has, inevitably, been dominated by feminist critics. The huge reappraisal of women’s lives, from their histories and achievements to their very identities was extended to Shakespeare criticism as early as 1975 by Juliet Dusinberre (*Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996 [1975]), in an extraordinary book which challenged the premises of ‘male’ literary scholarship and asserted women’s right to share ownership of the literary text, to read from a personal perspective, to ask their own questions, to lay claim to the authoritative critical voice. In the flood of feminist writing on Shakespeare that has followed, the most successful has been that which, like Dusinberre’s, shed light not only on Shakespeare’s women but on his men, which has examined the cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity and the playing of gender roles. To return to Woolf’s mirror, in the binary relationship of male and female, examination of the one is reflected in a clearer picture of the other. The ‘Was Shakespeare a feminist?’ approach of some of the early feminist critics was superseded by more subtle approaches that opened up fruitful avenues now taken for granted in our mental maps of the plays. These included the freeing of women characters from simplistic performance stereotypes (**Cressida** the whore, **Lady Macbeth** the dominatrix, **Goneril and Regan** the monstrous daughters); greater interest in relationships between women characters; the re-assessment of marginal characters; interest in the overt exploration of role playing and gender performance by the ‘**androgynous**’ heroines of the comedies; exploration of male anxiety in the face of assertive and dominant women and the need to perform masculinity.



Glossary

Virginia Woolf – novelist and essayist, 1882–1941.

A Room of One's Own – a famous work on women writers and their place in literature by Virginia Woolf, 1929.

Cressida – eponymous heroine of Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*, 1602.

Lady Macbeth – wife of Macbeth in *Macbeth*, 1606.

Goneril and Regan – King Lear's elder daughters in *King Lear*, 1606.

androgynous – of indeterminate sex.

Source: Penelope Freedman 'Shakespeare and Gender', Literature Compass 1 (2004)

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2004.00017.x>



2. *Hamlet*: What if the Play Were Called *Ophelia*?

Luke encourages readers to reconsider how the character of Ophelia and her significance might be understood, arguing that even in her silences she speaks.

William Hazlitt may have described Ophelia as ‘a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon’¹, but modern feminist literary criticism knows that it cannot look away from her. The sense that the feminist critic must ‘absent [herself] from felicity a while’ and ‘tell [Ophelia’s] story’ (V.ii.331–3) has pervaded criticism at least since the publication of Elaine Showalter’s 1985 essay ‘Representing Ophelia’. Showalter’s original question — ‘what can we mean by Ophelia’s story?’² — remains a live critical enquiry, and one to which many critics have since tried to give an answer. No longer might it be said that Ophelia’s ‘visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, and painting ...is in inverse relation to her invisibility in Shakespearean critical texts’³. Showalter’s own answer, given in response to Lee Edwards’s comment that, ‘without Hamlet, Ophelia literally has no story’⁴, is to say that ‘Ophelia does have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell; it is neither her life story, nor her love story ..., but rather the history of her representation’⁵. Showalter’s response has considerable merit. Ophelia is in only four scenes of the play — five, if you ... include the graveyard scene — and she is not the protagonist of the plot in which she finds herself: the play is called *Hamlet*, not *Ophelia*. It seems to make sense, therefore, to locate Ophelia’s ‘story’ outside the playtext because of her disproportionate status in popular culture and, certainly post-1985, in literary criticism. Nevertheless, locating Ophelia’s story outside the text is another way of not listening to what she says in the play. Sandra Fischer⁶ argues that ‘one must listen for the repression of Ophelia’s voice as juxtaposed against Hamlet’s noisy soul-wrenching soliloquies’. A feminist reading which

¹ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London 1818) p. 122.

² Elaine Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’, in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (London 1985) pp. 77–94.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴ Lee Edwards, ‘The Labours of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1979) pp. 33–49; Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia’, p. 79. 14 Rutter, *Enter the Body*, p. 27.

⁵ Elaine Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’, in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (London 1985) p. 78.

⁶ Sandra K. Fischer, ‘Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in *Hamlet*’, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 14/1 (1990) pp. 1–10: 3.



only listens to Ophelia's silences could equally be condemned by Christy Desmet's⁷ criticism of **iconographic readings**: that 'Ophelia has complexity only when she is silenced and made an object of sight'. Fischer⁸ goes on to argue that 'hearing Ophelia requires a new set of critical ears' when, actually, using the old ones to listen as intently to Ophelia as we do to Hamlet will work perfectly well.

The underlying problem with all these critical approaches is that they assume the subject of Ophelia's story is Ophelia herself, and behind this premise is the idea that Ophelia can only speak for herself. Kate Zambreno touches on this in her account of **T. S. Eliot's** essay on *Hamlet*. Zambreno⁹ notes that even if Eliot considers Hamlet's grief to be, in her words, 'excessive', 'Hamlet is still allowed to be overcome by despair, however excessive, because it is still read as **existential**. He is the hero of the story. It's Ophelia who wails and moans and drowns in an inch of water.' In Eliot's view, Hamlet is the 'hero'; his suffering is existential. It reaches the threshold for Eliot's '**objective correlative**', and so approaches the depersonalisation that he so lauded. But to Ophelia, '[n]othing is objective ... It is all so, so subjective. She takes things so personally.' Zambreno¹⁰ ultimately concurs with Eliot, and argues that Ophelia's experience in *Hamlet* is highly subjective, even if she does not condemn her for it. I think this emphasis on Ophelia's assertion of her subjectivity is misplaced: that is not all she is doing, or even the activity in which she is most consistently engaged. ... [W]hen Ophelia is given the opportunity to tell her story, she consciously refuses to give her individual experience any special status. Instead, she acts as a **conduit** for an essential story of female experience: abandonment, **misogyny**, patriarchal oppression, and sexual double standards. Reading Ophelia's seeming lack of interest in establishing her own distinctive subjectivity and her conduit-like quality as a deliberate technique which calls into question the tragic project of *Hamlet* will allow us radically to reconceive the subject and purpose of Ophelia's story, as well as making clear its generically subversive form and content.

⁷ Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst, Mass. 2002) p. 11.

⁸ Sandra K. Fischer, 'Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in Hamlet', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 14/1 (1990) p. 3.

⁹ Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (Los Angeles 2007) p. 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid*



Glossary

William Hazlitt – English essayist, 1778–1830.

iconographic readings – readings that centre on the visual properties of the text.

existential – relating to existence or being.

T. S. Eliot – American poet, dramatist and essayist, 1888–1965.

objective correlative – a situation or chain of events that symbolizes and seeks to evoke a particular emotion.

conduit – a channel or means of conveyance.

misogyny – hatred or contempt for women.

Source: Jillian Luke 'What if the Play Were Called *Ophelia*? Gender and Genre in *Hamlet*.' *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 49 (1), pp. 4–6.

<https://academic.oup.com/camqtly/article-abstract/49/1/1/5807541>



3. Othello: 'Sex in the City: An Ecocritical Perspective on the Place of Gender and Race in *Othello*'

Strickler explores the ways in which characters' gender in Othello can be understood in relation to ideas of 'the Wild'.

Simon Estok emphasizes the natural as a social force, emphasizing the construction of the female body, more directly in his 1998 article 'Environmental Implications of the Writing and Policing of the Early Modern Body: Dismemberment and Monstrosity in Shakespearean Drama'. Estok shows us the other side of Woodbridge's¹¹ coin: that rural England correlated the 'bodies of animals [with] women' (110). Furthermore, Estok links these depictions of women with other attitudes toward race. Quoting Keith Thomas's study *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800*, he describes how 'women — like the Irish, **the First Nations**, the poor, the black, and the mad — "were also near the animal state"' (Thomas 43, Estok 110). Thus his analysis of *Othello* focuses on how Iago juxtaposes 'images of the women and blacks with images of animals', the most famous being 'an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.123-34; Estok 113). I am especially interested in Estok's work because it so clearly links attitudes toward women with attitudes toward the natural world, particularly because he makes the distinction between the urban, the rural, and the wild.

Jeanne Addison Roberts¹² perhaps most clearly articulates the relationship between women and the wild in Shakespeare's plays, but for my purposes, her analyses are important because they address issues of violent colonization. Working on the assumption that the 'Shakespearean Wild is represented by landscape, foreigners, animals, and especially women', Roberts posits that 'the Wild is the locale for the male's necessary, seductive, and terrifying confrontation with the female, his braving of the perils of maternal regression and destructive erotic abandon in order **to annex** a woman into his Cultural context' (117, 24-25). This image relies on a postcolonial **rhetoric** of race where war and conquest figure prominently: Men are a colonizing force intent upon taking over a

¹¹ Woodbridge, Linda. *Women and the English Renaissance : Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620. d, 1540-1620*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (1984)

¹² Roberts, Jeanne Addison. *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press (1991).



woman's space. As Roberts suggests, 'the equation of women and Nature' is a common trope (25); however, this still serves mainly as a metaphor for describing gender roles during this period. Unfortunately, the equation does not fit the situation in *Othello*. Desdemona escapes the bonds of the city of Venice, but does not flee to the Wild. Instead, she flees to a figure who represents the Wild: Othello. ... the Wild space in *Othello*, independent of women or men, seeks to reclaim the land usurped by urban-scapes.

This freedom that the women claim is not based on **licentiousness** or bodily disregard, as characters like Iago would suggest. Instead, their vision of the Wild accepts their human culture, even perhaps requires their human culture; the **dichotomy** of Man/City versus Woman/Wilderness is not appropriate for the kind of liberty that Desdemona and Othello seek. They ultimately seek the truth, whether in the city or on the battlefield. Hence we see throughout *Othello* an obsession with truth. The Wild is an ethic that has been ousted from city environments like Venice, and the story of *Othello* aims to re-integrate that ethic across all these spaces. Othello's status as a warrior links him to the chaos that can infiltrate the ethics of the city, but also opens up a space within his identity to portray the battle of ethics, as it relates to race and gender, that the play addresses. Without an understanding of place and how a place is colonized, these relationships remain isolated and out of context.

Glossary

the First Nations – indigenous peoples of Canada

to annex – to appropriate

rhetoric – the art of effective speaking or writing

licentiousness – disregard of rules or 'correctness'

dichotomy – division into two exclusive or opposing groups

Source: <https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/oxford-university-press/sex-in-the-city-an-ecocritical-perspective-on-the-place-of-gender-and-isMge8IYhF>



4. *Measure for Measure* ‘A creature that did bear the shape of man’: hybridity and gender

Turban considers the ways in which the character of Angelo, for all his apparent ‘manliness’, may be considered a ‘feminised’ character.

When, at the beginning of *Measure for Measure*, Angelo is charged by the Duke to take care of the city in his absence, he is thus given a chance to assert his manhood. But the stern deputy fails in this endeavour by progressively trading piety for vice, charity for cruelty and chastity for lust. Unable to assert the virtues that were crucial to the construction of manhood in the early modern period, Angelo even grows feminine while in office. His feminisation derives from his transgressive desire for a woman, Isabella, a desire which overwhelms him as he himself confesses: ‘This virtuous maid / subdues me quite’ (2.2.188-189). At the time when Shakespeare wrote his plays, indeed, ‘strong heterosexual passion was not a sign of manliness, but could make one effeminate’¹³. Men who were ‘subdued’ by their attraction to a woman were deemed to be feminised because of their failure to prevail upon bestial impulses, a lack of control that was thought to be characteristic of women, and because it was more generally held that ‘lust effeminates, mak[ing] men incapable of manly pursuits’¹⁴.

Feminised because of his uncontrollable lust, Angelo also destabilises the gender divide as he proves to share women’s supposedly inherent duplicity. Indeed, as Isabella laments, the deputy displays the same ability to hide his evil behind a mask of righteousness:

ISABELLA. This outward-sainted deputy,
Whose settled visage and deliberate word

¹³ Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Gender Theory and the Study of Early-Modern Europe”, in *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock, Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2008, p. 7-24, p. 20.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage*, Women and Men in History, London, Longman, 1999, p. 29.



Nips youth i'th' head, and follies doth renew
As falcon doth the fowl, is yet a devil.

(*Measure for Measure*, 3.1.88-91)

In the play, Angelo's duplicity is expressed thanks to gendered representations of the vice, which helps feminise the character even more. His very name 'Angelo' and his evil deeds echo the dichotomy that structured female identity as well as the fears that this dichotomy meant to alleviate. In Shakespeare's time, indeed, 'women [were] imagined either as angels or whores as a psychological defence against the uncomfortable suspicion that underneath, the angel *is* a whore'¹⁵. Concealing his licentiousness behind his pious appearance and his name, Angelo thus revives this gendered representation of duplicity as inherent to women's nature.

Another female figure conjured up in the play also makes the gender of the character uncertain as it yet again associates him with women's deceitfulness. In act III, Lucio indeed turns the Duke's substitute into the son of a mermaid as he declares that: 'some report a sea-maid spawned him [Angelo]' (3.1.353). Suggesting that Angelo's outward moral rigidity is inhuman, and thus necessarily the fruit of unnatural breeding, Lucio's remark helps blur Angelo's gender as it reminds the spectator that the deputy proves as gifted as mermaids, and women in general, in the art of deception. Like his monstrous mother, he uses enchanting but dishonest words — like the promise he makes to Isabella to free her brother if she agrees to share his bed — to lure his victims into his dangerous arms.

Blurring his gender, Lucio also playfully feminises Angelo through this association, as fish are used as metaphors for the female genitals in *Measure for Measure*. When the clown describes the illegal sexual interaction between Claudio and Juliet, he indeed says that the young man is accused of 'groping for trouts in a peculiar river' (1.2.82). The connection which this remark establishes between the aquatic world and the female

¹⁵ Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 25.



genitals thus sheds new light on Angelo's hybridity. His metaphorical fish part is, in the context of the play, rather female than male. Questioned through the metaphors developed in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo's biological sex is also doubted as the physical characteristics of fish make his male physiology uncertain.

In the early modern period, one of the theories which explained the differences between men and women had it that the female and male sexes were distinguished, not by anatomical singularities, but by different degrees of dryness and of heat. According to the prevailing humoral theory:

The human body was thought to be made up of four humours — blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile — and it was their relative heat or moistness which determined maleness and femaleness. Men had a propensity to be hot and dry; women cold and moist. Men and women were anatomically the same, it was just because women were colder that their penis and scrotum were inverted inside their bodies as the uterus and womb.¹⁶

Questioning his male physiology, the associations of Angelo with a mermaid and other aquatic creatures propel the character into a state of sexual indeterminacy in Lucio's speech, an indeterminacy which is highlighted by the conclusion that the deputy is 'a motion generative' (3.1.356), a man who cannot use his male genitals, and 'an ungenitured agent' (3.1.409-410). This last remark puts the finishing touches to the character's sexual indeterminacy as it turns him into a strange hermaphrodite who, rather than being doubly enabled sexually, is deprived in both guises.

Source: Manon Turban 'A creature that did bear the shape of man': hybridity and gender in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Antony and Cleopatra and *Measure for Measure* <https://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/4971#quotation>

¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage*, Women and Men in History, London, Longman, 1999, p. 28.



5. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Or' in Meaning by Shakespeare

Hawkes considers the build-up and significance of elderly female characters in the play.

Surprisingly perhaps, for a play so taken up with youth, love, procreation and marriage, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems haunted by the shadowy images of older women. The play begins with Theseus complaining, like an impetuous legatee, of

how slow

This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,

Like to a step-dame or a dowager

Long withering out a young man's revenue.' (I, i, 3–6).

Of course, 'dowagers', older women who possess 'endowments' or sums of 'revenue', can be **benign** creatures. Lysander's elopement with Hermia will be facilitated by such a 'widow aunt',

a dowager

Of great revenue, and she hath no child —

From Athens is her house remote seven leagues —

And she respects me as her only son.

(I, i, 157–60)

But these women are largely invisible, excluded from the main action and firmly exiled to its borders. I am not here drawing on those 'silences' in the play whose very existence is mocked by Richard Levin, in which the text is said actively to 'repress' or 'conceal' a feminine or maternal 'subtext', conflicting with and contradicting the imperatives of its patriarchal world. The 'hidden mother' that Coppélia Kahn¹⁷ aims to retrieve in *King Lear* is perhaps suppressed in that play in a way that Nedar is not in this. A personage called

¹⁷ Coppelia Kahn, 'The Absent Mother in King Lear' in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (1986), edited by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, pp. 239-62.



Nedar is not 'hidden', but overtly referred to twice in the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Lysander's 'widow aunt', crucially important to the plot, has a similar claim to existence, even though she never appears on the stage. And she inhabits the same shadowy zone as Thisbe's mother (a part assigned to Robin Starveling, the tailor, in *Pyramus and Thisbe* (I, ii, 55)) who also never appears. The 'votaress' of Titania's order, the mother of the disputed **changeling**, whose 'swimming gait' in pregnancy is so strikingly reported (II, i, 130–4) dwells there too.

Of course, there are male absentees announced by the text: Pyramus's father (to be played by Tom Snout), Thisbe's father (a part claimed by Peter Quince), the Indian Boy demanded by both Oberon and Titania. But these are outweighed by a growing and finally tumultuous crowd of older women who gradually accumulate on the play's margins: the 'breathless housewives', the gossips, the 'wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale' (II, i, 37ff.) all routinely tricked by Puck, the 'ladies or Fair Ladies' (III, i, 38) congenitally afraid of swords and lions, confronted by Bottom and Snug, and the 'mothers' with whom the ambitious 'mother's sons' of the mechanicals consistently assert their **filiation** (I, ii, 73 and III, i, 69). All this takes place in the shadow of what Louis Adrian Montrose¹⁸ calls the 'pervasive cultural presence' of the ageing Queen Elizabeth, who functions as 'a condition of the play's imaginative possibility' and might even have been physically present as part of its first audience.

Glossary

benign – of a gentle disposition.

changeling – a child believed to have been substituted by fairies.

filiation – being the child of particular parents.

Source: 'Meaning by Shakespeare', Terence Hawkes, Routledge 1992.

¹⁸ 'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture. Louis Adrian Montrose. *Representations* No. 2 (Spring, 1983), pp. 61-94.



Gender-based Readings: suggested other reading

- Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women* (Routledge, 2000).
- Terri Power, *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice* (Macmillan, 2016).
- Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* 2nd Edition (Prentice-Hall, 1989).



Section C: Sexuality

1. Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*

Digangi explores the roles of Mistress Elbow, Isabella, Mariana and Juliet, considering the ways in which marriage and sexual status are used to define women in the play.

I will argue that the relentless definition and manipulation of female sexuality in *Measure for Measure* is the graphic symptom of male anxiety about female agency: to unravel male-constructed meanings for erotic pleasure, pregnancy, and abortion is to discover a fear of the dangers thought to ensue from a woman's control over her own body. Because it measures the perceived cost of a woman's autonomy in marital and reproductive affairs, *Measure for Measure* foregrounds female sexual desire only to deny the desirability of seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake. **Paradoxically**, the central emblem of this dangerous desire is the pleasure-seeking body of a woman who is excluded both from the personae of the drama and from the pages of critical texts: Mistress Elbow.

Mistress Elbow, as one might well not recall, is the only legal wife in the play. In order to understand the significance of her status, we must first determine what is at stake in play's implicit and explicit allusion to the commonplace Renaissance marital **paradigm** — maid/wife/widow — whose central space is occupied by Mistress Elbow alone. Mariana, who is 'nothing', according to the Duke, because 'neither maid, widow, nor wife', frustrates but does not subvert the paradigm, as McLuskie¹⁹ notes, for the logic of comedy ultimately maneuvers her into the central slot.' Nevertheless, in privileging the 'coherent maleness' of the maid/wife/widow paradigm to which the Duke heavy-handedly directs (male?) attention, McLuskie loses the opportunity to demonstrate the paradigm's failure as an ideological measuring device. As Lucio observes, the Duke's seemingly comprehensive list of female socio-sexual roles is incomplete: 'My lord, she may be a **punk**; for many of them are neither maid, widow nor wife' (5.1.180-81). Likewise, a reading that places

¹⁹ Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: King Lear and Measure for Measure," in *Political Shakespeare*.



pressure on the conventional system can superimpose upon the Duke's **tripartite** measure of marital status a parallel and more problematic measure of sexuality. What I am calling the measure of female sexuality would account for the number and kind of a woman's sexual partners: the virgin (none), the wife (one/legal), and the whore (more than one/ illicit). Following this line of inquiry allows not only the examination of an early modern discourse surrounding and constructing the barren or pregnant female body, but a re-examination, through Mistress Elbow, of the normative category of 'wife', the middle term of both systems, as inherently unstable and challenged.

It is crucial to maintain the analytic distinctness of these two 'measures', even while noting their areas of overlap or intersection. We then realize that, before her marriage, Mariana threatens order not only because she disrupts the maid/wife/widow paradigm, but because she simultaneously and equivocally occupies the sexual position of 'wife' in the virgin/wife/whore paradigm. Juliet, before she legally becomes a wife, occupies the sexually charged space between 'wife' and 'whore'. And Isabella occupies the space of resistance and loss between 'virgin' and 'wife' — a space that is collapsed by the apparently seamless passage from 'maid' to 'wife'. Such ideological gaps between fixed, normative roles and shifting, unruly sexualities are smoothed over by Carol Thomas Neely's²⁰ argument that 'women are defined and contained through their place in the marriage paradigm. ... These roles are in turn defined by the mode of sexuality appropriate to them: virginity for maidens, marital chastity for wives, and abstinence for widows'. Because it attaches an 'appropriate' sexuality to the marital roles through which women are always already defined, this formulation does not acknowledge that the marital paradigm, with its chronological progression of essential roles in which the 'wife' can never be a 'maid' or 'widow', itself obscures the resistances that Mariana, Isabella, and Juliet pose to its containing and defining strategies — the resistances posed in the overlapping and contested spaces between virgin and wife, between wife and whore.

As the only wife in the play, Mistress Elbow most powerfully and paradoxically represents the unruly resistance within marital sexuality: the possibility of the wayward wife, who is at once promiscuous (like the stereotypical widow), and, as I hope to show, opposed to fertility (like the maid). The logic of comedy may require that Isabella, Mariana,

²⁰ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press (1985).



and Juliet progress from their unstable marital roles and sexualities into the nominally stable marital role and sexuality of the 'wife'. Yet Mistress Elbow demonstrates that such a resolution is fictive, for she provokes, instead of dispelling, the anxieties that surround and interpret (Juliet's) active sexual desire on the one hand and (Isabella's) virginity on the other. Since female sexuality in *Measure for Measure* is tendentiously 'read' through specific bodily characteristics, the 'gross characters' inscribed in Juliet's pregnant, ideologically whorish body reveal 'all th'effect of love' and incite others volubly to evaluate all the causes. Isabella's virginal body, by contrast, allows others (and herself) only veiled, sublimated, allusions to a deferred sexuality that will blossom with ripe time.

Glossary

paradoxically – in a seemingly self-contradictory way

paradigm – a standard, perspective or set of ideas

a punk – a female prostitute

tripartite – in three parts

Source: ELH Vol. 60, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 589-609 (21 pages) published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press.



2. Hamlet's Wounded Name

Edelman explores how Hamlet finds himself sexually and personally 'placed' in Hamlet, considering the extent to which conventional sexual and relational fulfilment is unavailable to him.

Disdaining the **putrid carrion** as which he recognizes flesh, Hamlet dismisses life and sex as equally **excremental**. 'We fat ourselves for maggots' (4.3.22–23), he notes and traces the course of Alexander's dust to find 'it stopping a bunghole' (5.1.192). He may pray for sublimation, 'O that this too too sullied flesh might melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew' (1.2.129–30), and imagine himself as standing apart from any earthly appetite — 'I eat the air' (3.2.90–91), he jests — but his mind is drawn to dirt and stench with what we must call a vengeance. His revulsion in the face of embodiment, redoubled at the very thought of sex, leads him beyond the paternal charge to root out 'damned incest', even to the point of **decrying** conception and demanding 'no more marriage' (3.1.147). Fanning the flames of Hamlet's loathing for all that 'flesh is heir to' (3.1.63), the ghost, to which Hamlet is heir, as well, leaves Hamlet, as son, asunder, torn between the enforcement of sexual norms to repair what is out of joint and the extravagance of his passion for enforcing those norms, which exceeds all normative bounds. By being too much his father's child, he would have no children be fathered; defending too well the institution of marriage, he would have no marriage at all.

Stricken by this excess of **filial passion** for the reassertion of norms, Hamlet is truly 'too much in the sun' (1.2.67), or too much his father's son, for his brief against breeding not to breed, as he claims the sun does, maggots — the maggots, I mean, that taint his mind as it feasts on decay and corruption, leaving Hamlet as much out of joint as the time, as perverse as his father's restless ghost that refutes by its presence the order of 'or' it returns from the grave to defend, mocking the very distinction pronounced in 'to be, or not to be'. The inwardness, construed as **psychic** depth, for which Hamlet provides the model, responds therefore to the impossible task he confronts as his father's child: to live from the outset an afterlife as ambassador of the dead without, in the process, becoming merely an ambassador of death.



But Hamlet learns that success in the one means failure in the other. In accepting the duty to set time right, he keeps it out of joint, becoming thereby the prototype of the modern subject as Child whose efforts to make present a ghostly past in the space of an infinite future produce instead the emergent order of **hetero-temporal repetition**. If the Child thus effectively keeps time out of joint, how can Hamlet hope to put time to rights without putting an end to the Child? ‘Why would’st thou be a breeder of sinners?’ (3.1.121–22), Hamlet inquires of a startled Ophelia, who seems **to intuit** that breeding as such is what Hamlet seeks to prevent. And he does so because he knows full well, as a subject in the form of the Child, that breeders of life prevent life, too — and literally, by coming before. ‘Remember me’ is the fatal text the past inscribes on the Child, preventing the Child from living a life not out of joint with time. This out-of-jointedness positions Hamlet between two versions of generational succession: an older model of heroic, because unfathered, subjectivity (whose final exemplar may be Fortinbras) and that of the Child commanded by the father to preserve this older model but unable, because subservient to the force of that command, ever to fulfill it. No wonder the question of Hamlet’s age exerts such fascination; something keeps him from ever escaping the role of his father’s son.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare names that something and bequeaths it to us all. Beckoned to follow his father’s ghost but held back by Marcellus and Horatio, Hamlet cries out: ‘By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me!’ (1.4.85). Playing on the double sense of ‘let’ — to permit or allow, on the one hand, and to hinder or prevent, on the other — these words free Hamlet to follow his father, the ‘ghost of him that lets me’; the ghost of him who gave life and preempts it; the ghost who confirms, in more ways than one, that time is out of joint; the ghost whose example dooms Hamlet at once to be and not to be — that is, to be and not to be ‘Hamlet’, the name by which he is prevented from being what it gives him leave to be. But that, of course, is what Hamlet means, perhaps even literally: ‘[I] am let’. It is also what **normativity** means in the world we inherit from Hamlet: to be let, constrained, or prevented by the power that gives us permission to be, even while it incites, perversely, our passion to constrain what appears as perverse. ‘Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest’, the ghost enjoins his son. And by way of ‘let not’, Hamlet is let and left in the knot of his name, which he, though left without children, must leave to the world he leaves behind, affirming a hetero-temporal



subjectivity so deeply in debt to the dead that it needs to invent the future to pay off what is mortgaged to the past.

Glossary

putrid carrion – rotting dead flesh

excremental – unpleasantly like bodily waste

decrying – disparaging, belittling

filial passion – the passion of a son or daughter

psychic – mental

hetero-temporal repetition – complex repetition of time

to intuit – to work out by instinct

normativity – relating to the normal

Source: 'Hamlet's Wounded Name' in *Shakespeareer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Lee Edelman ed. Madhavi Menon, Duke University Press 2011



3. The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night*

Pequigney considers how the 'bisexuality' of characters plays a central role within the exploration of romantic love in Twelfth Night.

Sebastian's amorous involvement with members of both sexes falls into a broader configuration of the plot and **derives substantiation from** different dramatic situations. Bisexual experiences are not the exception but the rule in *Twelfth Night*, and they are vital to the course of love leading to wedlock for the three principal lovers other than Sebastian: Orsino, Olivia, and Viola.

Near the close of the play, Orsino asks Cesario for his/her hand. He proposes marriage to someone he knows and has come to love only as a male servant, seen only in masculine clothes, whose feminine name he never once utters, and whom in the scene he twice addresses as 'boy' (5. 1. 127, 264) — even at the proposal itself — and refers to as late as his final speech as being still a 'man' (385). Early on, despite the cross-dressing, he does perceive Viola's true gender, noting her girlish lip and voice and 'all' as 'semblative to a woman's part' (1.4.30-34). The response, though, may do less to establish his heterosexual credentials than to symptomatize homoerotic **proclivities**, for according to **Freud**, 'what excited a man's love' in ancient Greece (and still may do so) 'was not the masculine character of a boy, but his physical resemblance to a woman as well as his feminine mental qualities', with the 'sexual object' being 'someone who combines the characters of both sexes' and 'a kind of reflection of the subject's own bisexual nature'. This theory seems clearly borne out by Orsino; and, further, his capacity to love the youth Cesario and the girl Viola is crucial to the happy ending for them both. His attraction to Olivia, where he is heterosexually straight, like the other would-be wooers Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio, is a disaster. The love for Cesario could not have changed instantaneously with the revelation of his femaleness; if it is erotic then it would have been erotic before; what does change is that marriage suddenly becomes possible, and hence the immediate proposal. This love that commences as homoerotic and conducts Orsino into nuptial heterosexuality is an unbroken curve, a bisexual continuity.

Olivia ends up engaged to marry a perfect stranger, Sebastian, and not the one she fell madly in love with and thought she had become betrothed to, who all along had been a



male-impersonating girl. If she misses the tell-tale signs of femaleness that Orsino picks up on, that is because it is in her erotic interest to fantasize Cesario as virile, yet the feminine subtext, however ignored, remains legible. In Sebastian's last speech to her, coming just after the confusion of identity has been straightened out, he says, almost tauntingly,

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.
But nature to her bias drew in that.
You would have been contracted to a maid;
Nor are you therein, by my life, deceiv'd:
You are betroth'd both to a maid and man.
(5. 1.257-61)

She has been 'mistook' in two related senses: 'mistaken' in taking Cesario for a male, and 'taken amiss' in being captivated by a female (cf. 2.2.34). But in 'that' matter of being 'mistook', nature 'drew' 'to her bias' or described a curved course (like the curve of a bowling ball that the noun denotes), and this homoerotic swerving or lesbian deviation from the heterosexual straight and narrow cannot be considered unnatural since it is effected by nature herself. 'Would' in the third line above, indicative of a contrary-to-fact condition, may also connote 'would like [to]', a condition of wishing. That 'you are betroth'd both to a maid and man' is not a deception but precisely right: to 'both' twins, the maid who elicited your love and whom you thought you were contracting to marry, and the man who accidentally and unbeknownst to anyone substituted for her and to whom you are in fact engaged. The line (261) may also bear this alternate reading: Sebastian could be referring only to himself, as a maiden man, a girl/boy, a master (to Olivia) — mistress (to Antonio).

Glossary

derives substantiation from – gains its substance form, is embodied in

proclivities – inclinations, predispositions

Freud – Sigmund Freud, Austrian psychoanalyst, 1856-1939



Other suggested reading

- Useful passages on the issue of sexuality in Shakespeare's comedies can be found in C.L. Barber's classic *Festive Comedy* (1959), in which he discusses what he sees as Shakespeare's returning the audience to the security of heteronormativity in the play's conclusion.
- Guy Patricia, Anthony. 'The visual poetics of gender trouble in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* and Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*.' In *Queering the Shakespeare Film: Gender Trouble, Gay Spectatorship and Male Homoeroticism*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017. 89–134.
- Goran Stanivukovic, *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality* (Bloomsbury 2017) provides a useful overview of issues relating to Shakespeare and sexuality.
- Chapter 4: 'How Queer Is the Shakespearean Canon?' in Melissa E. Sanchez's *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* (London: Arden, 2019) includes some interesting queer readings of *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello*; they're quite densely theoretical, however, so extracts need to be carefully chosen to ensure accessibility.
- Emma Smith's *This is Shakespeare* (2019) has a very good chapter on transgressive desire in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Source: Vol. 22, No. 2, SPRING 1992 – Studies in Shakespeare, The University of Chicago Press.



Sexuality: suggested other reading

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Section D: Ethnicity

1. 'Diversifying Shakespeare'

Espinosa identifies a set of difficulties surrounding ethnicity and race as critical lenses for reading historically distant texts, such as Shakespeare's plays. This captures the historicist/presentist dichotomy identified on page 9.

Mappings of modern-day meanings of 'race' onto readings of early modern literature and culture were initially met with critical scrutiny, and scholars of race in Shakespeare often had to defend their use of such methodological practices. In their volume, *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, for example, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin address this scrutiny and justify critical readings of early modern texts that employ modern-day meanings of 'race' and 'colonialism'. Responding to Emily Bartels' assertion that post-colonial critics are often inclined to 'start with struggle and work backward' and 'read identity through conflict, cross-cultural encounters through conquest, race through racism' (47), Loomba and Orkin acknowledge that critics 'must not flatten the past' by reading it through our own 'assumptions and imperatives' but are quick to point out that 'neither is it desirable nor even possible entirely to unhook the past from the present' (5–6). In other words, Loomba and Orkin suggest, there is a clear value in drawing on the energies of the present to understand the past, especially when it comes to the subject of race:

We read the past to understand our own lives, and equally, our own commitments direct us to the 'truth' about the past. The relationship between societies separated in time is as complex as the one between societies that are spatially and culturally apart — in both cases 'difference' is a category that should be neither erased nor valorized.

Uncovering that 'truth' about the past and about the present is the impetus for many scholars in Loomba and Orkin's collection and for many scholars of race and Shakespeare thereafter.

There is a tendency to situate the issue of race and racism comfortably in the early modern world and to see Shakespeare's works as merely reflecting attitudes where, strictly speaking, 'race' had yet to be defined. But this approach, of course, belies the long history of struggles and social inequities surrounding racial difference. To this end, some



scholars have turned their attention to exploring how best to employ readings of race in Shakespeare while allowing for cross-historical approaches to drive the conversation. In his thoughtful attention to the value of a cross-historical approach in Shakespeare studies, Peter Erickson writes,

The difference between the past and the present is not that the past qualifies as history and the present does not. The present is also historical. Both histories are in motion. Our contemporary interests are enhanced by the perspectives we bring from our early modern involvements. ('Race Words' 172)

Erickson's interest in this two-way street comes after a richly crafted analysis of race words in *Othello*, a play that he sees as rendering Shakespeare inadequate for critical race studies if it 'is considered, by itself, to exemplify and constitute a full critical race framework' ('Race Words' 174). Recognizing the limits of Shakespeare is a key and most certainly is not an impediment. The distance between our world and his, Erickson argues, is precisely 'what it means to begin to do critical race studies in the early modern period' ('Race Words' 174). Erickson sees in the recognition of distance something beneficial, and he eventually gestures at our obligation as race scholars in Shakespeare: 'My hope is that we might create pedagogies that enable us to extend this experience of distance, which is both a freedom and a responsibility, to our students' ('Race Words' 174). Erickson, here, echoes a long line of scholars who have pushed readers to think beyond mere historical context when exploring an issue as significantly charged as race. To move beyond the seemingly self-contained genius of Shakespeare and to acknowledge why difference and distance matters can only enhance our understanding of Shakespeare's value, both to us and to our students.

Source: Ruben Espinosa 'Diversifying Shakespeare' *Literature Compass* 13/2 (2016): 59–60 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lic3.12303>



2. “And wash the Ethiop white”: femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*

Newman considers the ways in which images of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ appear in Othello and the troublesome human, artistic and critical discomforts that arise.

Much of the disgust Rymer²¹, Coleridge²², and other critics betray comes not from the fact of Othello's individual blackness, but from the relation of that blackness to Desdemona's fair purity. Coleridge calls it ‘monstrous’. Embedded in commentaries on the play which seek to ward off Othello's blackness is the fear of **miscegenation**, and particularly the white man's fear of the union of black man with white woman. Such commentators occupy the rhetorical position of Roderigo, Brabantio, and Iago who view the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as against all sense and nature: ‘I'll refer me to all things of sense, / . . . Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy, / . . . Would ever have (to incur a general mock) / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou?’ (I.2.64, 66, 69–71).

In *Othello*, the black Moor and the fair Desdemona are united in a marriage which all the other characters view as unthinkable. Shakespeare uses their assumption to generate the plot itself — Iago's ploy to string Roderigo along is his assurance that Desdemona could not, contrary to nature, long love a black man. Even his manipulation of Othello depends on the Moor's own prejudices against his blackness and belief that the fair Desdemona would prefer the white Cassio. Miscegenation is an issue not only on the level of plot, but also of language, for linked oppositions, especially of black and white and their cultural associations, characterize the play's discourse. ‘Black ram’ tups ‘white ewe’; ‘fair’ Desdemona runs to Othello's ‘sooty bosom’. The Duke **mollifies** Brabantio with ‘Your son-in-law is far more fair than black’. Desdemona is described, in what for the Renaissance would have been an oxymoron, as a ‘fair devil’, and as ‘fair paper’ and a ‘goodly book’ across the white pages of which Othello fears is written ‘whore’. In the final scene Emilia exclaims in response to Othello's confession that he has killed Desdemona,

²¹ Rymer, Thomas (1693) “A Short View of Tragedy,” in Spingarn, J.E. (ed.) (1957) *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, II.

²² Coleridge, S.T., *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (1960) London, J.M. Dent. First published in 1930.



‘O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!’ Like the proverb ‘to wash an Ethiop white’, Emilia’s lines exemplify what I will term rhetorical miscegenation, for despite the semantics of antithesis, the **chiasmus** allies the opposing terms rhetorically.

In the Renaissance no other colors so clearly implied opposition or were so frequently used to denote polarization. As Winthrop Jordan²³ points out in his monumental study, *White over Black*, the meaning of black even before the sixteenth century, according to the OED, included ‘deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul. . . . Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly, baneful, disastrous . . . iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked . . . indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc.’ (Jordan, 1968, 7). . . . White represented the opposite. The emphasis in *Othello* on Desdemona’s fairness and purity, ‘that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster’ (V. ii. 4–5), and the idealization of fair female beauty it implies — the entire apparatus of **Petrarchanism** — is usually said to point up the contrast between Desdemona and Othello. But I want to argue to the contrary that femininity is not opposed to blackness and monstrosity, as white is to black, but identified with the monstrous, an identification that makes miscegenation doubly fearful. The play is structured around a cultural **aporia**, miscegenation.

Glossary

miscegenation – a term for interracial sexual relationships

mollifies – placates, soothes

chiasmus – a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order

Petrarchanism – the poetic style introduced by Petrarch and characteristic of his work, marked by complex grammatical structure, elaborate conceits, and conventionalized diction

aporia – an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory

Source: Karen Newman (Howard, J. E., & O’Connor, M. F. Eds), Routledge, 1st edition (1 Dec. 2008).

²³ Jordan, Winthrop (1968) *White Over Black*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.



3. Antony and Cleopatra: Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage

Jankowski uses a number of salient productions of Antony and Cleopatra in order to explore issues of ethnicity in the casting of Cleopatra.

Rutter²⁴ provides a long history of the problems inherent in erasing Cleopatra's blackness. While the playtext contains almost as many references to the title character's blackness as does *Othello*, the location of the historical Egypt as a source of white Greco-Roman civilization — the precursor to white Euro-American civilization — makes it essential to reinforce Cleopatra's **Ptolemaic ancestry** rather than her Shakespearean blackness. While Othello may be a part of black Africa who found himself on the shores of white Europe, Cleopatra, as ruler of the only "white" part of Africa, must be similarly "white." Rutter's reading of the racial politics of casting Cleopatra — there can be black or tawny members of the Egyptian court, but the queen herself cannot be a woman of color — is cogent, especially given the fact that Rutter approaches the play through performances by some of the black actors who portray Charmian and Iras. Her history of these actors' movement from invisibility to visibility — from somewhere out at the edge of the stage to centerstage — is compelling. Equally compelling are her comments on the Talawa Theater Company's production of *Antony and Cleopatra* and on the single performance (in John Caird's 1992 production) of a black Cleopatra on the Royal Shakespeare Company stage, when Claire Benedict, understudy to Claire Higgins's Cleopatra, went on as the queen of Egypt. Though Rutter often moves away from her stated critical purpose, she presents many challenging readings of specific contemporary performances of Shakespeare's plays.

²⁴ Carol Chillington Rutter. *Enter the Body: Women and representation on Shakespeare's stage*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.



Glossary

Ptolemaic ancestry – a line of Egyptian pharaohs from 305BC–30BC.

Source: Theodora J. Jankowski's review of Carol Chillington Rutter's *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* (2001) in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2003, Volume 54, Issue 1. <https://academic.oup.com/sq/article-abstract/54/1/107/5073383?redirectedFrom=fulltext>



Ethnicity: suggested other reading

- Other useful materials on *Othello* can be found in: Steggle, Matthew, 'Othello, the Moor of London: Shakespeare's Black Britons' in Robert C. Evans, ed., *Othello: A Critical Reader* (London: Arden, 2015), 103–124.
- Ridley's introduction to the Arden 1st edition of *Othello*, for example, gives a very different view of race in the play to that provided by Ayanna Thompson in the revised edition of Arden 3rd edition.
- Celia Daileader's *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Sonia Massai *Shakespeare's Accents: Voicing Identity in Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), which has a good deal to say about a range of diversity issues, including social class and ethnicity.
- On *Macbeth*, there are African-American perspectives in Ayanna Thompson, Scott L. Newstock, *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (Palgrave, 2010).
- Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (Routledge, 2017).
- Ian Smith, 'White Skin, Black Masks: Racial Cross-Dressing on the Early Modern Stage.' *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 33–67.
- Kim Hall *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1995).
- Ayanna Thompson *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).



Section E: Disability

1. “Unaccommodated Man”: Dismodernism and Disability Justice in *King Lear*

Gottlieb addresses Shakespeare’s use of the ‘broken’ human body as a means of exploring King Lear’s re-evaluation of how individuals relate to their societies, and how societies seek to ‘place’ individuals living with disabilities of different kinds.

In many ways, *King Lear*’s treatment of disability is embarrassing. The play relentlessly intertwines disability and tragedy, depicting the journeys of temporarily-able bodies becoming disabled as central to its tragic arc. Disability is used as a narrative **prosthesis** in every one of *King Lear*’s multiple plots. Gloucester is blinded, Lear experiences madness, Edgar feigns madness as ‘Poor Tom’, and the Fool is ambiguously aligned with intellectual disability. Additionally, disability is used as a problematic metaphor for characters’ figurative ‘sight’, rationality, and decision-making. Edgar’s unconvincing moral gloss interprets his father Gloucester’s blindness as a sign of divine **retribution**. The play has been cited as a central example of how literature is biased against blind people.

While all of this is true, I argue that the play also contains a radical view of disability — a perspective that not only makes disability central to the human condition, but also voices an awareness of the social responsibilities that stem from such an understanding. The play’s exploration of what it means to be human and what distinguishes humans from other animals has significant implications for Disability Studies that have not yet been explored. *King Lear* is an important play for the emerging field of Shakespearean Disability Studies, not only because the play’s problematic (and conventional) deployment of disability requires critical analysis, but also because the play’s radical approach to disability and poverty has the potential to align the field with disability justice.

In three significant speeches, Lear exposes human beings’ fundamental reliance on things, animals, and each other. Through these definitions of what it means to be human, *King Lear* unsettles the construct of the able body and presents a view of



humanity that anticipates Lennard Davis's²⁵ concept of **dismodernism**, which makes disability central to a postmodern view of identity. Davis foregrounds the 'partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence' (*Bending over Backwards* 30). He continues: 'Rather than the idea of the complete, independent subject, endowed with rights (which are in actuality conferred by privilege), the dismodernist subject sees that **metanarratives** are only 'socially created' and accepts them as that, gaining help and relying on legislation, law, and technology' (*Bending over Backwards* 30). As Lear shifts from power to powerlessness, he begins voicing similar views of human subjectivity. He draws from embodied knowledge to critique the social institutions that distribute accommodations **inequitably** and expresses a desire for a more equitable human society. After Lear and Gloucester experience disability, they start defining humans as interdependent and link this understanding to social justice by advocating for poor and oppressed people.

We can also say the play makes the privileged experience disability; in fact, disability and homelessness are relentlessly coupled in the play. The play invites us to consider disablement as primarily a social process. For both Lear and Gloucester, disability coincides with the loss of familial support, social status, and a place to live. Further, both characters experience advanced age and face the contempt of many who view old men as having no place in society.

The play aligns aging and disability with **disaccommodation** by society. For Lear and Gloucester, this disaccommodation prompts an awareness of the injustice of routinely leaving so many bodies unaccommodated. Both men begin caring about economic inequality after they experience social disablement. While many critics have explored the play's concern with poverty and economic inequality, I argue that the play's exploration of disability and views of the body that anticipate dismodernism are integral to its concern for economic justice. Disability is central to what Peter Holbrook terms the play's 'utopian countermovement' (356) — its subtle exploration of 'social hope' (355) amidst its depiction

²⁵ Davis, Lennard J. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York University Press, 2002.



of individuals' tragedies. In *King Lear*, disability is not represented solely in relation to individuals (as is conventional in representations that cast disability as 'tragic'), but also in relation to the social world and political resistance. Embodied knowledge of disablement sparks Lear's and Gloucester's social justice awakenings.

The play brings an awareness of social oppression to its exploration of body-mind difference by exploring the basic need that all bodies have for accommodations and depicting the tragedies that ensue when these needs are not met. Lear draws attention to Poor Tom's body, 'the thing itself' (3.4.106), to create a binary not between able bodies and disabled bodies, but rather between accommodated bodies and 'unaccommodated' (3.4.106-7) bodies. The play exposes the fantasy of the independent, able body and prompts audiences to consider the universal need for accommodations that human embodiment entails. These accommodations are routinely taken for granted by those privileged enough to have them — until they are removed.

Glossary

prosthesis – an artificial body part.

retribution – punishment.

dismodernism – the idea that 'difference' is what all people have in common.

metanarratives – overarching accounts or interpretations.

inequitably – unfairly.

disaccommodation – unsuitedness.

Source: Christine M. Gottlieb "'Unaccommodated Man": Dismodernism and Disability Justice in *King Lear*' *Disability Studies Quarterly* vol. 38, no 4, 2018 <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6079>

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2. 'This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen': Feste, Lear's Fool and the border between 'idiocy' and mental illness'

Equestri considers 'idiocy' and 'madness' and relates both to the mental health and well-being of Feste and Malvolio in Twelfth Night.

The terms 'idiocy' and 'lunacy' reveal a seemingly **proto-modern** separation between 'intellectual disability' and 'mental illness', to use terms of modern psychology. Both conditions are and were 'disabling', where 'disability' indicates 'the social process' that turns a physical defect 'into a negative by creating barriers to access'. Seeing early modern folly through the presentist lens of disability studies shows that 'difference' can be described through a 'medical model of disability', which **pathologises nonnormativity**, or a 'social' one, which considers how society defines it. Shakespeare's characters can thus be used to probe the early modern **idiosyncratic** ways of defining human variation. ...

Feste refuses to be called a fool ('I wear no motley in my brain', 1.5.52–3), but proclaiming, 'Wit [...] I am sure I lack thee' (1.5.29–32), he jests on his own irreversible witlessness. Intellectual capacity, as he suggests in hoping that Olivia's unborn child's 'skull Jove cram with brains' (1.5.109), was in fact innate and unchangeable, because it was determined by God's power over the laws of Nature. Foolishness was regarded as a condition of the soul and therefore, unlike madness, was incurable by medicine. Yet, it could be described in **physiognomical** terms, as Olivia shows by calling Feste 'dry fool' (1.5.37). Early modern doctors who commented on the dryness of the soul spirits linked it to a faulty brain structure and cognitive performance. While the adjective 'dry' may be taken also as a synonym of 'dull', Feste quickly rejoins it to its basic meaning as lacking water when he proposes to 'give the dry fool drink, then is / the fool not dry' (1.5.41–2). The irony of this proposed solution to mend folly was apparent to Shakespeare's audience, in that a natural fool, by medical as well as by legal definition, could not improve.

Idiota pointed at the meaning of the Greek word as 'private person', someone without status or literacy; at the same time a well-off fool with property could also be legally nominated an 'idiot' if the Court of Wards dispossess him of his inherited possessions. ...

As *idiotia*, the fool was also an individual lacking the common ideas, an expression derived from Stoic philosophy indicating the nobles' knowledge, especially regarding



religion, mathematics, the soul and society. Fools, as uneducated and uneducable, were incapable of abstracting, and so they lacked the vital knowledge to access the honourable society. When Feste says to Cesario ‘who you are / and what you would are out of my welkin. I might say “element”’ (3.1.56–8), he shows class-consciousness in acknowledging both Viola’s superiority and his own lack of common knowledge. He accepts that, as a fool, he lives in his own ‘element’ with no apparent interest in crossing boundaries, at least until he faces madman-Malvolio.

A confrontation between them at the border of madness and foolishness is staged from Act 1. Malvolio attacks: ‘Infirmity, that decays the wise, doth ever make the better fool’, to which Feste retorts: ‘God send you, sir, a speedy infirmity, for the better increasing your folly!’ (1.5.74–5). ‘Infirmity’ is an interesting word choice because, meaning both weakness and disease, it marks the liminality between foolery and illness. Though it signals mobility, ‘infirmity’ can overturn only the wise man’s **cognition**, whereas the fool’s disability cannot be changed – at most it can be intensified. Later, in opposing lunatic-Malvolio, Feste takes his revenge for being called ‘barren rascal’ (1.5.80), an expression fusing **physiological** and spiritual folly, dryness of spirit and moral ignorance.

The fake letter is forged to ‘make a contemplative idiot of [Malvolio]’ (2.5.18). Contemplation was the highest faculty of the rational soul, a concept that scholastics associated with mystical experience of the divine and with true discernment: possessing it, Malvolio would straddle the representations of the **gull** and the melancholic (a madman with a meditative pose). Yet, what initially is envisioned as a trick to turn Malvolio into a fool actually ends up making him a lunatic: ‘possessed’ (3.4.9), ‘tainted in’s wits’ (3.4.13), sleepless, cross-gartered, ranting and doing ‘nothing but smile’ (3.4.11), a clear indication of madness at the time because it consisted of a continuous unmotivated action and betrayed a sinful soul. Malvolio, saying he is ‘not black in my mind, though yellow in my legs’ (3.4.24–5), rejects his former melancholy to embrace his present madness, allegedly caused by an excess of choler (yellow bile). Unlike Feste, whose foolery can at the very best be punished through whipping but can never be reverted, Malvolio can recover his wisdom. ...

Rather than a demoniac, Feste is an exorcism-performing holy curate, which is reminiscent of the fool’s spotless Pauline purity. The innocent thus visits the butler in his dark prison, a treatment far more common for dangerous lunatics than for natural fools at



the time, and their confrontation showcases how the natural fool is free while the madman is locked up. The prison is a token of physical and psychological dislocation, a condition more observable in madmen than fools. There is little evidence that in Shakespeare's England idiots were hospitalised: this treatment was dedicated to violent madmen or to **destitutes** who were also disabled but needed primarily economical support. Idiots were generally free to wander, so sometimes they would even be perceived as beggars. Feste is indeed a wanderer: he is reproached for minding his own business instead of being where he should be, and he gets away from Olivia's control to end up as far as Orsino's palace. Because 'foolery [...] does walk about the orb like the sun' (3.1.37), he wanders about asking for tips, like roaming fools asking for alms in the city streets. To prevent the assimilation of madness to foolishness, Shakespeare blocks Malvolio's visual contact with Sir Topas, something in itself unnecessary because Feste is disguised. Like Imogen, Feste champions the separation of idiocy and lunacy: he says that 'the fool shall look to the madman' (1.5.132–3), that 'the fool delivers the madman' (5.1.233–4); and as Sir Topas, he repeatedly distances himself from Malvolio by accusing him of devilry – 'Hyperbolical fiend', 'dishonest Satan' (4.2.26, 32) – and of having hallucinations. Yet he alludes to some characteristics madness and folly share: both entail lack of knowledge – he says to Malvolio that 'there is no darkness but ignorance' (4.2.42–3) – and flawed wits – 'you are mad indeed, if you be / no better in your wits than a fool' (4.2.88–9). Malvolio himself unintentionally plays on the liminality between the two notions, saying to Sir Topas/Feste 'I am no more mad than you are' and 'I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art' (4.2.48–9, 90). The claims are inevitably ironic, yet they simultaneously remind the audience that a fool is not, legally speaking, mad, and that a professional fool is actually in full command of his wits. The expression 'to be in one's wits' stresses again the mobility of lunacy: Malvolio suffers from temporary fits and can therefore intermittingly fall in or out of his five wits. The 'stable' fool conversely stands as a healer of madness who entreats Malvolio to leave his 'bibble babble' (4.2.99), the type of frenzied talk Feste later imitates as he reads the lunatic's letter to Olivia. While the lady sees this as a symptom of madness ('How now, art thou mad?'), by snapping 'I do but read madness' (5.1.290–1) he finally rejects any association with mental illness.



Glossary

proto-modern – a state approaching the modern

pathologises – regard as psychologically abnormal

nonnormativity – things not perceived as ‘normal’

idiosyncratic – personal, individual

physiognomical – relating to the practice of assessing a person’s character or personality from their outer appearance, especially the face

cognition – the process of acquiring knowledge

physiological – relating to the normal functions of living things

gull – dupe, fool

destitutes – people who are extremely poor

Source: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0184767819835561>