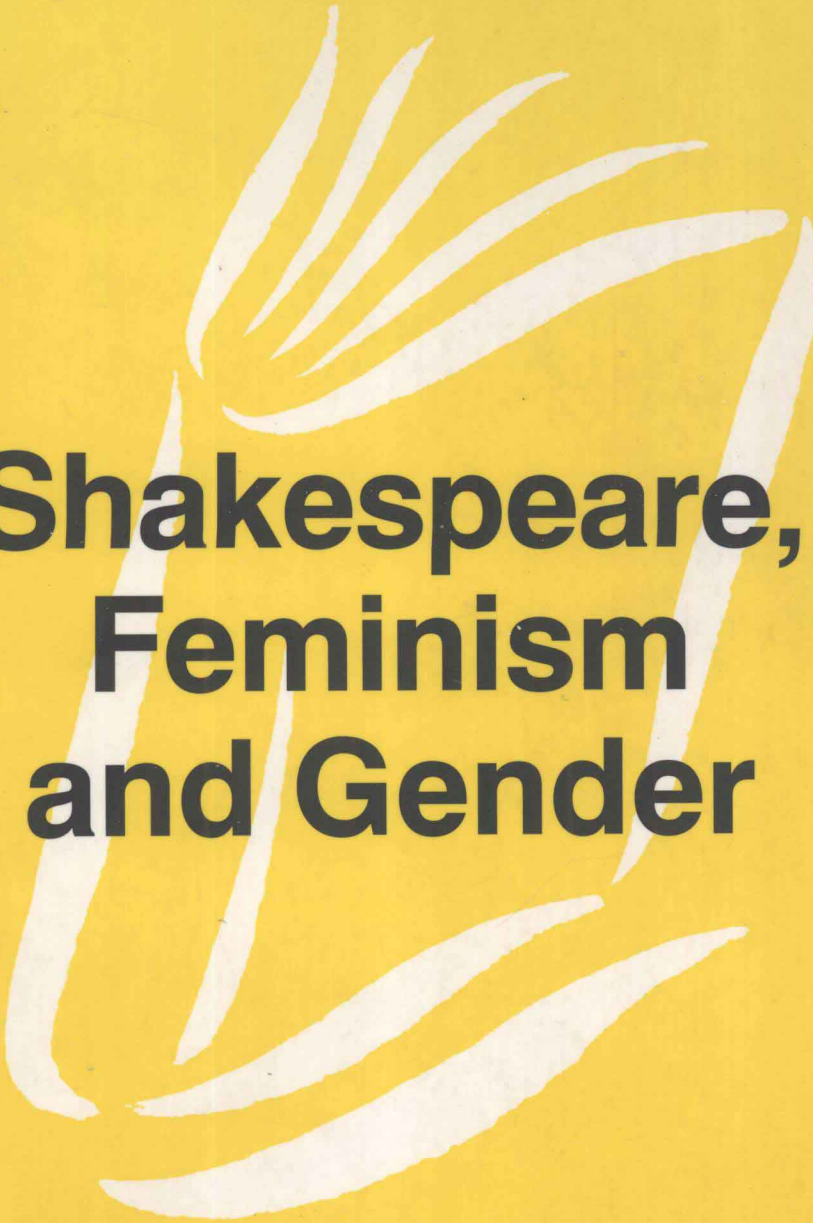


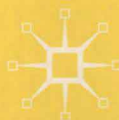
**New Casebooks**



# **Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender**

**Contemporary Critical Essays**

Edited by Kate Chedgzoy



*New Casebooks*

SHAKESPEARE,  
FEMINISM AND GENDER

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EDITED BY KATE CHEDGZOY

palgrave



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First published 2001 by  
PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of  
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and  
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 0-333-71651-5 hardback

ISBN 0-333-71652-3 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and  
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shakespeare, feminism, and gender / edited by Kate Chedgzoy.

p. cm. — (Contemporary critical essays)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-333-71651-5 (cloth)—ISBN 0-333-71652-3 (pbk.)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616—Characters—Women. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616—Political and social views. 3. Feminism and literature—England—History—16th century. 4. Feminism and literature—England—History—17th century. 5. Women and literature—England—History—16th century. 6. Women and literature—England—History—17th century. 7. Gender identity in literature. 8. Sex role in literature. 9. Women in literature. I. Chedgzoy, Kate. II. Series.

PR2991 .S54 2000

822.3'3—dc21

00-042066

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Printed in China

# Acknowledgements

Thanks to Rebecca Lemon and Suzanne Trill for encouragement and advice; to Diana Paton and Ramona Wray, whose rigorous and generous comments on drafts of the Introduction were very much appreciated; and above all to Martin Coyle: among editors, he stands up peerless.

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# General Editors' Preface

The purpose of this series of New Casebooks is to reveal some of the ways in which contemporary criticism has changed our understanding of commonly studied texts and writers and, indeed, of the nature of criticism itself. Central to the series is a concern with modern critical theory and its effect on current approaches to the study of literature. Each New Casebook editor has been asked to select a sequence of essays which will introduce the reader to the new critical approaches to the text or texts being discussed in the volume and also illuminate the rich interchange between critical theory and critical practice that characterises so much current writing about literature.

In this focus on modern critical thinking New Casebooks aim not only to inform but also to stimulate, with volumes seeking to reflect both the controversy and the excitement of current criticism. Because much of this criticism is difficult and often employs an unfamiliar critical language, editors have been asked to give the reader as much help as they feel is appropriate, but without simplifying the essays or the issues they raise. Again, editors have been asked to supply a list of further reading which will enable readers to follow up issues raised by the essays in the volume.

The project of New Casebooks, then, is to bring together in an illuminating way those critics who best illustrate the ways in which contemporary criticism has established new methods of analysing texts and who have reinvigorated the important debate about how we 'read' literature. The hope is, of course, that New Casebooks will not only open up this debate to a wider audience, but will also encourage students to extend their own ideas, and think afresh about their responses to the texts they are studying.

*John Peck and Martin Coyle*  
*University of Wales, Cardiff*

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# Introduction

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KATE CHEDGZOY

## I

'Head bans *Romeo and Juliet*' ran the front-page headline in London's *Evening Standard* newspaper on 19 January 1994. The prohibition of a Shakespeare play that is one of the cornerstones of the National Curriculum in British schools would, indeed, be a newsworthy event. But, in fact, the story that followed merely reported that Jane Brown, headteacher of a primary school in Hackney (an ethnically and culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged London borough) had turned down a charitable foundation's offer of cut-price tickets for a performance of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>1</sup> The *Evening Standard*'s decision to accord such prominence to this minor incident is surprising enough, yet in subsequent weeks the story proliferated across all the London-based national daily and Sunday papers, and even received international attention, in Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. The intemperate rhetoric of prohibition and exclusion used by the *Evening Standard* was echoed through this coverage, strongly suggesting that the case was symptomatic of something larger than itself, for it hardly seems fair to equate the polite refusal of subsidised tickets for a single ballet performance with an all-out ban on Shakespeare's play. That one of the small daily decisions a headteacher made about what was best for her school turned into a major media pre-occupation tells a complex and revealing story about the cultural politics of Shakespeare in 1990s Britain. It is a story which discloses

how thoroughly concerns about cultural hierarchy and value, epitomised by the name of Shakespeare, are entangled with anxieties about gender and sexuality.

The *Evening Standard* and other papers alleged that Jane Brown refused the tickets for *Romeo and Juliet* because she considered it 'a blatantly heterosexual love story'.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the determining factors in the decision were the cost of the tickets and transport, which would have been beyond the means of most children in the school. The press coverage failed to acknowledge that material factors affecting wealth and mobility might genuinely have an impact on children's access to culture. At the same time, journalists ignored the highly praised, participatory, community-based work on dance and drama being done at Kingsmead School – work that strove to involve all children in the pleasures of making theatre, rather than giving a select few the opportunity to consume a high-cultural version of it. At stake in this story, therefore, is an unacknowledged struggle between competing understandings of culture. One, embodied in the ensuing controversy by *Romeo and Juliet*, represented the highly valued aesthetic recreations consumed by a privileged élite as a treasury of the British national heritage that should be graciously extended, in special circumstances, to the uncultured masses. As so often, Shakespeare was constituted in this crisis as the site where élite, popular and national interests converged. The second understanding of culture, articulated by Jane Brown's supporters, conceives it as a set of social and artistic practices, which can be made and shared by a collectivity of people – a collectivity that may be internally diverse in terms of class, ethnic or racial positionings – and which are valued according to the pleasure and satisfaction derived from this active participation.<sup>3</sup> The *Evening Standard* and its allies thus position themselves as the defenders of one version of what Raymond Williams called 'official English culture',<sup>4</sup> standing firm against the incursions of 'political correctness' and an implicitly anti-English multiculturalism represented by the Hackney school under Jane Brown's headship. In the Jane Brown affair, Shakespeare became the sign under which these different understandings of culture were brought into conflict, even though the controversial trip was not to a performance of his play *Romeo and Juliet*, but to the ballet based on it. This fact was swiftly occluded in the press coverage, with the result that ballet's associations with élite foreign culture and effeminacy – troubling to the populist English conservatism that led the attack on Brown –

were replaced by the unproblematically masculine Englishness of the national bard. This conflation of concerns about national identity, race, gender, sexuality and class on the site of Shakespeare's iconic persona was paralleled at the local level, where the situation became polarised around the personalities of white, middle-class, lesbian headteacher Jane Brown, and Gus John, one of her key antagonists in his role as Hackney's heterosexual, African-Caribbean Director of Education. As a result, some very painful and problematic connections between racism and homophobia were made by participants on all sides of the case.

The distinctive set of concerns laid open by the Jane Brown affair returned to the agenda of public debate about cultural identity and cultural participation on an international scale the following year, with the remarkable success of the movie *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*.<sup>5</sup> Widely praised by critics and enjoying massive commercial success, Baz Luhrmann's film was seized upon by teachers of Shakespeare because of the opportunities it offered to construct a bridge between contemporary popular culture and the Shakespearean classroom. Most high school and university students are very sophisticated readers of popular culture: juxtaposing Luhrmann's film with Shakespeare's play has proved a fruitful way of enabling them to bring their complex understandings of representational politics to bear on the less immediately accessible Renaissance text. Moreover, Luhrmann and his team were quite knowing about the extent to which the film was performing such important work of cultural mediation, as the 'Production Notes' posted to the official website bear out.<sup>6</sup> To take just one of many possible examples: *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* opens with a news broadcast, in which the words of the play's Prologue are uttered by a black, female newscaster. These famous phrases serve as news headlines and as annotations to an onscreen montage that makes the movie's Shakespearean reconfigurations of gender, sexuality, race, parent-child authority issues, religion and cultural conflict into a media event, a newsworthy take on the concerns of a 1990s society self-consciously anxious about its identity and its stability. For Alison Findlay, this breathtaking opening sequence does not 'moderniz[e] Shakespeare beyond recognition', but rather 'brilliantly captures the essentially public nature of family politics and alliances in Renaissance England'.<sup>7</sup> But of course it does also modernise Shakespeare, in a way which ensured that the movie made his play newly accessible and exciting for exactly the kind of youth

audience whose interests were invoked for such different purposes in the Jane Brown affair. The same gesture thus both returns the play to its history, and underlines its continuing relevance. Similarly, feminist criticism of Shakespeare characteristically weaves between past and present, driven by a commitment both to intervene in contemporary cultural politics and to recover a fuller sense of the sexual politics of the literary heritage. In doing so, it has made its mark on the way that Shakespeare is reproduced and consumed in schools, theatres, cinemas and many other public sites, as well as expanding and enriching the range of interpretations of the texts and their original historical location.

Feminist criticism has recently contributed to the rejuvenation of the practice of local reading of literary texts, showing how carefully contextualised interpretations of particular cultural moments can open a window onto larger social concerns.<sup>8</sup> In their different ways, the Jane Brown affair and Baz Luhrmann's film both exemplify this, vividly demonstrating how anxieties about gender, sexuality, race, class and cultural hierarchy intersect on Shakespearean terrain, and thereby underlining why Shakespeare's plays and his continuing iconic status remain a matter of concern for the politically motivated critics whose work is included in this volume.

The essays here elaborate a range of answers to the crucial question about social relations posed by Alan Sinfield when he asks how 'readers not situated squarely in the mainstream of Western culture may relate to such a powerful cultural icon as Shakespeare'.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of what constitutes 'the mainstream', how its boundaries are defined and maintained, and how those who are outside it experience their simultaneous exclusion from it and proximity to it, is precisely what is at issue, of course, in the case of Jane Brown. As that incident demonstrates, the education system is a primary site where these practices of inclusion and exclusion are elaborated and Shakespeare's cultural privilege is sustained. The teaching of Shakespeare is profoundly entangled with questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, national identity and cultural hierarchy in post-colonial Britain as much as in those former colonies which got their Shakespeare via the institutions of imperialism.<sup>10</sup> In England and Wales, for example, just at the moment when the processes by which the literary canon is formed and maintained are being called into question, the imposition of national requirements and criteria for the teaching of English literature in state-maintained schools have ensured Shakespeare's continuing centrality in the curriculum

as a specifically national writer. This privileging of Shakespeare need not in itself be a conservative phenomenon, of course: the popularity of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is just one of many possible testimonies to the radical potential that Shakespeare can embody within the education system – a potential which teaches in schools and colleges are constantly realising. But the punitive treatment that Jane Brown suffered when her resistance to the pieties of British cultural conservatism collided with Shakespeare also underlines just how compelling is the responsibility of feminist Shakespeare scholars to continue to make critical interventions in full awareness of those complex and difficult material realities that form the contexts of academic debate.

## II

Anthologies of critical essays have their own cultural and intellectual politics: they participate in the formation of a critical canon, helping to define a field and shape priorities of interest and hierarchies of contributors within it.<sup>11</sup> A milestone in the history of feminism's encounter with Shakespeare is the 1980 anthology *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, one of the editors, Gayle Greene, reflecting on the production of that volume, remarked: 'While feminist criticism of Shakespeare is in some sense unlike other sorts of feminist criticism, in that it is more a matter of reassessing than of rediscovering a literary canon, still we found that we could, on the basis of our work with Shakespeare, describe elements of a feminist approach to literature that applied to the enterprise as a whole.'<sup>13</sup> Assuming that feminist scholars will mainly be interested in women's writing, Greene presents feminist criticism of Shakespeare as both representative and exceptional in relation to the larger project of feminist literary studies. Undoubtedly, the history of feminist encounters with Shakespeare has had a dynamic relation to that wider project. Though I have resisted selecting and ordering the essays in this volume to tell a single story about the development of feminist Shakespeare criticism in the last decade, nevertheless that period has arguably seen a series of distinctive re-orientations in the field. These changes have occurred in dialogue with shifting concerns and priorities in feminist literary and cultural studies, which are not themselves purely internal to literary criticism as a scholarly and

pedagogical practice, but are shaped by the engagement of critics with political concerns in the world outside the academy, the world of which the academy is a part. Examples of such engagements in the present volume include Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin's account of the construction of martial masculinity in the second tetralogy of English history plays, which is informed by feminist analyses of the 1991 Gulf War's impact on US cultural and sexual politics;<sup>14</sup> or the carefully nuanced readings of recent British cultural politics found in the essays by Alan Sinfield and Lizbeth Goodman.

The development of feminist criticism of Shakespeare through the 1970s and 1980s has already been charted retrospectively in a number of anthologies, survey articles and bibliographies.<sup>15</sup> The present volume accordingly focuses on the 1990s, offering a snapshot of a decade when feminist criticism of Shakespeare's plays both flourished and diversified. Like all snapshots, it offers a limited view, and a great deal has been left out of the picture. My priorities were to cover a range of widely studied texts, while showing how gender-inflected criticism has challenged the conventional hierarchies of scholarship and participated in a revision of the Shakespearean canon; to demonstrate a range of critical and theoretical approaches; and to give a sense of the breadth of intellectual and political concerns with which feminist criticism of Shakespeare has engaged. Many reluctant decisions to exclude important work had to be made, and the 'Further Reading' section gives clues as to some of the other ways this volume could have been organised, testifying to the extraordinary diversity of work in this field.<sup>16</sup>

As well as deciding what to include, I had to decide what to call the book. For both academic and commercial reasons, 'Shakespeare' clearly had to feature in the title, and the fact that his name was the one element of the title that escaped serious scrutiny tells its own story about just how difficult it can be to get a critical perspective on his overwhelming presence. The Casebook series, in treating Shakespeare so much more generously than any other author, is also complicit in the reproduction of this Shakespearean cultural hegemony, of course. So 'Shakespeare' it was to be, but 'Shakespeare and' – what? I liked the polemical commitment of 'Shakespeare and Feminism', which testifies to the enormous changes wrought in literary studies by the impact of several waves of politically committed scholars. But while it is clear that feminism has had a beneficial effect on Shakespeare studies, it is less obvious

that international movements for the empowerment of women have anything to gain from Shakespeare's company, or that Shakespeare merits a high place on the agenda of global feminism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this light, the bold pairing of 'Shakespeare and Feminism' seems comically hubristic. Moreover, within the smaller field of Shakespeare studies, it does not seem a precise descriptor at a moment that has witnessed a shift away from a consideration of the pro-, anti- or proto-feminist qualities of Shakespeare's representations of women, to the concern with gender and sexuality as interrelated analytic categories that now animates much work in this area. The desire either to bury Shakespeare or praise him has given way to analysis of the ideological and cultural work done in his own time and since by his plays' representations of gender.

The dyad of Shakespeare and feminism did not seem to offer the right title for this volume, therefore. But because I find some justice in the claim that attention to gender as a central category of analysis can sometimes be a way of recuperating the energies of feminism for a mainstream that largely resists or shrugs off its challenge, I was also reluctant to let 'feminism' be superseded by the rubric of 'gender'.<sup>17</sup> Such a gesture would be politically and intellectually premature, running the risk of ceding some of the hard-won and tenuously held gains achieved by the efforts of feminists. Introducing their critical anthology *Shakespeare and Gender*, however, Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps assume that such a supersession of 'feminism' by gender has indeed taken place, and that this development is a welcome one. They state that "gender studies", which has recently come to replace "feminist studies", recognizes that issues of gender are not limited to a focus on women', and further claim that it 'exposes the heterosexual bias implicit in various feminist discussions of eroticism' (p. 11). Their presentation of 'feminist studies' is a partial one: from the start feminist work on Shakespeare has tackled the construction of masculinity and femininity, sexuality and gender.<sup>18</sup>

More worrying is that by positioning 'feminist studies' and 'gender studies' purely as choices to be made from a menu of academic approaches, Barker and Kamps overlook the fact that feminism's primary energy came from political engagement, a desire to transform gender relations in the world. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, '[t]o assume that the study of gender can be definitionally detached from the analysis and critique of gender inequality, oppression, and struggle (that is, from some form of feminism) ignores, among other

things, the telling fact that gender analysis per se became possible only under the pressure of the most pointed and political feminist demand'.<sup>19</sup> Changing agendas for the academic study of gender and sexuality, and for feminist interventions in the politics of teaching and research, exist in a dynamic relation to developments within the discipline and in the wider culture. Pertinent instances include the impact on feminism of queer politics and theory, which demand that we suspend what we thought we knew about the relation of sex to gender and think again;<sup>20</sup> or the various gains and losses which have marked feminism's progress as public discourse and social practice through the last couple of decades. It would be too easy to describe this as a process in which the naïve and simple protests of feminism give way to the more sophisticated negotiations of gender critique, or to characterise recent work on gender and sexuality as the output of disobedient daughters, ungratefully rejecting the worthy but now embarrassingly old-fashioned efforts of their intellectual foremothers.<sup>21</sup> Recent work is informed by and emerges from the earlier studies, as the women who might – though not, I suspect, without protest – be cast as the 'mothers' of feminist criticism of Shakespeare continue to extend the challenges and provocations of their own work, while generously enabling new scholarship.<sup>22</sup>

The final choice of title thus reflects my sense that it is important to record and testify to these debates, and not to occlude them by tacitly taking up one position or another. Triangulating the three terms 'Shakespeare', 'feminism' and 'gender' in the title is intended to signal that none is less important than another, and to hold open the possibility of a range of relations among them, which may involve – in various combinations – mutual support, reinforcement, stimulation and opposition. These complex dynamics are reflected not only in the individual essays, but in the relations among them established by their juxtaposition in this volume. The book opens with Kathleen McLuskie's emphasis on the diversity of feminist criticism, and its grounding in political commitments.<sup>23</sup> The essays which follow reflect this diversity in terms of their choice of texts, thematic concerns and critical approaches. They also make manifest the multiple political differences that exist within feminism.

### III

Kathleen McLuskie's opening essay is one of three reprinted here that range widely and seek to establish the fundamental relevance



of feminism to several crucial areas in Shakespeare studies: textual editing, teaching, academic research and performance. Each of these essays is attentive to the material contexts in which the meanings of Shakespeare's plays are produced and circulated, and the institutional settings in which feminist interventions are called for. If McLuskie's 1985 essay, the earliest piece included in this volume, is placed first, this should not be read as an assertion of chronological priority, so much as a reminder of what continue to be some of the most important issues in the field. In 'Feminist Theory and the Editing of Shakespeare' (Chapter 2), Ann Thompson investigates feminism's relevance to the editing of Shakespeare, and emphasises that this endeavour should not be seen as an arcane scholarly task, but as one that is of crucial importance to all who are interested in bringing feminist perspectives to bear on his plays, whether in educational or theatrical contexts. She traces the reproduction of Shakespeare in the male editorial tradition, showing that nothing is neutral or innocent, not even 'the words', and argues that it is vital for feminists to intervene in this ongoing process of mediation. Lizbeth Goodman's essay (Chapter 3) extends this interest in the cultural mediation of Shakespeare in the crucial direction of contemporary performance practice, comparing the diverse strategies of the subsidised mainstream and the feminist fringe. Her investigation of the sexual politics of Shakespearean performance privileges the contemporary British context, while posing questions of considerable significance to the field as a whole. In contrast, Chapter 4 engages with Shakespeare's place in the recent cultural politics of the USA, specifically the resurgence of a martial masculinity associated with the wars in Vietnam and the Gulf. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin examine the role of military culture in the construction of both masculinity and femininity in the sequence of plays about English wars and English history sometimes known as the second tetralogy. In drawing attention to this manifestation of transatlantic differences in feminist approaches to Shakespeare, my intention is not to reinstate the confrontational transatlantic divide that some histories of politicised Shakespeare criticism have delineated.<sup>24</sup> Rather, I want to stress the engagement of all these critics with the particular cultural location and specific political circumstances in which they do their work, and their shared demonstration of the value of using Shakespeare to engage with these conjunctions.

Next comes a series of studies that focus on just one or two of Shakespeare's plays, moving through the dramatic canon in a