The Weyward Sisters

Shakespeare and Feminist Politics

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The Weyward Sisters

To Margaret, Deepak, and the memory of Lyta

All. The weyward Sifters, hand in hand,
Pofters of the Sea and Land,
Thus doe goe, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice againe, to make vp nine.
Peace, the Charme's wound vp.

Act I, scene iii, *The Tragedie of Macbeth,*
the First Folio (1623)

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Contents

Introduction

Our title takes its direct reference, of course, from the witches of *Macbeth*. For us *Macbeth*'s midnight hags are no longer the despised demons of critical and theatrical tradition. Instead, we derive from them the image of the Weyward Sisters, genial inhabitants of the imaginary space from which we launch this book. This is the space in which Lorraine Helms sets her hypothetical production of *Macbeth*. In this production, the Weyward Sisters appear as a troupe of clowns, acrobats, magicians, musicians, and puppeteers to present a very different kind of play within the play. Neither grotesque nor glamorous, the Weyward Sisters embody the theatricality of *Macbeth*'s witchcraft via the liminality of itinerant players. The way these players interpret the events of the plot may not at first be intelligible to those who are accustomed to seeing Shakespeare's play through the eyes of the title character. Yet, Helms argues, the Weyward Sisters work as closely with the Shakespearean text and draw more broadly on its theatrical traditions than contemporary interpretations of *Macbeth* as the tragedy of a soliloquizing soldier or the disintegration of a marriage.

The image of the Weyward Sisters, an ensemble of players who bring their various skills together to produce a play, is one around which our different feminist critiques appropriately constellate. We write collaboratively, believing that through collaboration we begin to redefine scholarship as a communal enterprise rather than as an isolated and apolitical act. Yet we do not thereby erase our individual identities: the newts and frogs we each bring to our cauldron come from distinctively different cultural positions and experiences. These positions and experiences configure our individual chapters, inflecting our voices with accents acquired in

varied social and professional settings. We do not attempt to render these accents homogeneously, but let them stand here for the differences that must be mediated in any collective action.

Our contributions to this volume represent different dimensions of a feminist materialist approach to Shakespeare. In a climate where both materialism and feminism can be reduced to claims of political correctness, these terms require some explanation. In describing our work as feminist, we mean not merely that we discuss themes of femininity but that feminism informs our methods and purposes in writing literary and theatrical history. Gender, as Joan Wallach Scott argues, is "the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups, and time" (2). Recognizing this revises the writing of history as radically as the Weyward Sisters revise the staging of *Macbeth*: feminist inquiry produces not variations on humanist or historicist themes, but new and different knowledges of texts, traditions, and institutions.

In describing our work as materialist, we acknowledge the weight and pressure of material determinants over other dimensions of social life. But we also write in the shadow of what Heidi Hartmann has called "the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism." In the 1960s and 70s, feminists drawn to the agenda of the left recognized that Marxism's "sex-blind" investigations had erased gender as a factor in establishing and maintaining relations between labor and capital (Barrett, 1–13). The critical approaches they developed in response to this erasure comprise current materialist feminism, whose topics include the ideologies of gender as they operate within specific cultural contexts, the history of women's social conditions, the relations among feminist, socialist, and anti-racist politics, and the intersections of material and discursive practices in the cultural forms and social institutions of the past and present.

Focusing on these intersections, we hope to uncover areas of both continuity and change between "the Shakespearean moment" and our own postmodern condition. Material practices are stubbornly resilient, and a historicism that neglects continuity in order to celebrate change risks underestimating this resilience. For Catherine Belsey, "Materialist feminist history is supple, subtle, and complex: it has no place for a unitary and univocal metanarrative," for "all texts exceed their own unitary projects; all texts release new interpretations as we bring to bear on them different – and differential – reading practices" (264–5). This excess arises from the unstable and indeterminate nature of patriarchy itself (261). Like Belsey,

we seek "new interpretations" that derive from "different – and differential – reading practices." At the same time, we want to affirm that even the most supple, subtle, and complex histories imply determinate political positions. Hence each of our chapters strives to register the intricacies of Shakespeare's representation of femininity without obscuring the unsubtle and all too stable oppression that constitutes the fundamental material condition of women in patriarchy.

Jyotsna Singh's chapter, "The Interventions of History: Narratives of Sexuality," argues that the sexual labor of the prostitute in early modern England is predicated on the repression of female desire. Singh writes "history from below," aiming to recover the history of women's sexuality from the sedimented layers of the past to create a record of those for whom there is little recorded history. Her account of female sexuality, unlike many historical accounts, does not attempt to recover the individual experience of women in the past, but to show how material conditions *assign* sexual subjectivity to the female prostitute, as they do to the wife. If specific subject positions (either "whore" or "wife") are assigned to women, does any possibility for resistance remain? Singh finds that resistances are irrecoverable at the level of the prostitute's experience, but not at the level of *reading* itself. Reading against the grain of the representation of prostitutes within Renaissance drama and contemporary cultural contexts, Jyotsna Singh's narrative implicitly entails a reconceptualization of history. Dramatic representations of prostitutes, drawing on Renaissance discourses of the seductive dangers of female sexuality, enabled and sustained the practice of prostitution. Thus the discursive sexualization of women, interarticulated with material practices geared to the fulfillment of male desire, can in part account for the degraded social status of prostitution and its corollary, the fact that prostitution is traditionally women's work.

Dympna Callaghan's chapter, "The Ideology of Romantic Love: The Case of *Romeo and Juliet*," develops an explicitly Marxist understanding of the new formations of sexual love that nascent capitalism required. In so doing, she extends and redefines psychoanalytic and new historicist readings of desire. Asking how *Romeo and Juliet* intersects with early modern changes in modes of production and with postmodern discourses of desire, Callaghan emphasizes the larger social mechanisms (such as the organization of production and the structures of family life) through which desire is produced, rather than the micro-historical phenomena engaged by

psychoanalysis (the individual psyche) and new historicism (the anecdote). While most feminist discussions of romantic love have centered on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Callaghan opens the early modern period to this history of desire. She argues that the ideology of romantic love is among the most potent modalities of the real, material oppressions that women endure. Far from a benign discourse of love and marriage, this ideology excessively restricts the erotic, enforcing compulsory heterosexuality and naturalizing asymmetrical power relations between men and women. These constraints persist precisely because the ideology of romantic love is so persistantly seen as benign. "Feelings" of love are presented as evanescent and their enduring material effects occluded, as though romantic love were unmoored from all social conditions and constraints. The ideology of romantic love is, then, both a dominant discourse and a discourse of domination.

For Lorraine Helms, feminist history includes the present tense of performance. In her chapter, "Acts of Resistance: The Feminist Player," she investigates ways in which the material conditions of theatrical production affect the performance choices available to those who play the woman's part in contemporary performance. What choices are possible when playing Shakespearean roles that have traditionally incorporated the fears and desires of male directors, playgoers, actors, and even characters? Exploring what she calls "the politics of prosody," Helms evaluates the interpretive restrictions that the conditions of a masculinist stage enforce as well as those inscribed in the play texts. In Helms's search for strategies to restage Shakespearean play texts, the Weyward Sisters come to symbolize the achievement of a feminist practice that can be recovered from the play text and its theatrical traditions.

Our purpose, then, in each of the three essays is to engage afresh with the relation between Shakespare and materialist feminism. The political significance of this relation, however, demands further explanation. While feminist, Marxist, African-American, and gay perspectives have challenged the once undisputed interpretive privileges of the dominant culture, these multiple perspectives may, some would argue, serve only to diversify the commodity known as Shakespeare. Once enshrined, multiplicity may reproduce either the pluralist notion that Shakespeare can embrace an infinite variety of interpretations or its postmodern equivalent, the notion that an endless diversity of interpretations can subdue Shakespearean texts to the commodifying impulse of a market economy. For Fred Inglis, feminists

and others are merely "crying their wares in the cultural marketplace" (58); for Edmund White, feminist criticism concentrates on "far-fetched reinterpretations of the classics," ignoring "late-century ills–poverty, urban decay, violence . . . etc." (43).

It is of course evident that there is no causal relation between feminist work on Shakespeare and the resolution of, say, urban violence. We acknowledge distinctions between activism and both academic and artistic work, as we acknowledge those between criticism and performance, pedagogy and scholarship. But our distinctions admit similarities as well as differences: to create brute oppositions can have unfortunate results. If arguments such as White's and Inglis's are taken to their logical conclusions, they sever both criticism and performance from political engagement. Ultimately, they deny artists and academics the right to exercise their skills in response to current political issues and events – exactly the consummation so devoutly wished by reactionary funding agencies during the recent "culture wars."

We therefore emphasize the political dimensions of critical and theatrical enterprises as they emerge in current practices of reading, writing, and staging. We articulate these current practices with such historical phenomena as the labor of prostitutes in Renaissance England, the material preconditions of modern romantic love, and the conventions of the Elizabethan stage, hoping thereby to suggest ways in which feminist work in cultural history can contribute to the politically significant enterprise of opening new conceptual space.

We also hope that such work can open physical spaces, and especially the classrooms and workshops in which Shakespeare is presented to students of literature and theatre. Recent political criticism has called for pedagogical strategies to disclose curricular practices that contribute to social subordination. Among these practices is the appropriation of Shakespeare for elite culture (Ferguson, 278–81). In response to (if not yet fulfillment of) these appeals for change, formalist literary criticism has given place to historicism and other theoretical approaches, while drama workshop leaders have created exercises and improvisations that bring the categories of race, class, and gender to bear on students' interpretations of Shakespearean roles (Shepherd, 88–107). Our essays, we hope, will be part of this ongoing change, contributing to classroom discussions and workshop exercises. Callaghan's and Singh's chapters, for example, suggest ways in which the macro-political developments of economic production and

social/legal sanctions have influenced the history of desire that continues to influence students' lives, while Helms's "politics of prosody" offers students a method through which playing Shakespearean verse can become a micro-political intervention.

In linking Shakespeare and politics, we do not intend to lose the pleasures of the play texts. The Weyward Sisters do not conjure adversarial politics from Shakespeare only to bemoan the dire consequences. They do however seek (and find) different pleasures than those the play texts offer to the dominant culture. If, in so doing, feminists seem to be "crying their wares in the cultural marketplace," recall that those "wares" are the stories we tell about the stories Shakespeare has told us. And if our stories seem at first "far-fetched," recall that feminist critics and players have indeed travelled great distances. We now invite all who will to join us.

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1

The Interventions of History

Narratives of Sexuality

Jyotsna Singh

Introduction

Making the silent spaces speak . . .[1]

In the past two decades, feminist engagements with Shakespeare's texts have opened up new perspectives on the culture and society of the Renaissance. Especially since the 1980s, as feminist scholars have moved away from liberalism – with its attendant myths of a unified subjectivity and an ahistorical universalism – they have consistently identified *history* as a crucial aspect of any cultural analysis. As a part of this process, feminist readings of Renaissance literature and society have drawn on new modes of historiography that correct the gaps and omissions of existing histories. Together with other marginal groups, feminists recognize the power of systems of representation, which authorize certain kinds of knowledge, while repressing and marginalizing alien discourses and modes of knowledge. Therefore, as Michel Foucault would argue, if women and others want to resist being cast as subordinate subjects within elitist histories, they must develop "alternative discourses" – or "antihistories" – that displace and disrupt the continuum presupposed by hegemonic historiographies.[2]

Joan Scott similarly draws attention to the power of signifying systems, and calls for a new historical investigation in which gender is used as a central analytic category, not only as it applies to kinship and familial ties, but also to education, the economy, (that is, the labour market), and the polity. Her method has some important implications for feminist historicist critics: it reveals the gender inflections of earlier, seemingly disinterested or "objective" modes of historical inquiry; it focuses on gender as a

primary way of signifying relationships of power; and it seeks to disrupt the ideologies that lead to the "appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation" ("Gender," 94). Scott questions traditional Marxists for whom gender is simply a "by-product of changing economic structures" (88), and instead draws on Derrida's critical practice to argue for a historical "deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference" (92). Based on these assumptions, she develops a methodology for analyzing, among other things, the production of female subjectivity: in history, in ideology, and in language.[3]

As theorists of history, both Foucault and Scott emphasize the ways in which discursive modes shape and produce social practices, reminding us of the constructed nature of history. What are the implications of such findings for a feminist historiography? They make the task of feminist historians/critics particularly complex in that they have to tread a fine line between using and manipulating systems of representation and facing doubts about notions such as truth, meaning, and knowledge, based on naïvely representational notions of language. Of course, contemporary feminist history cannot escape its own discursivity; its goal, however, should be to disrupt the existing array of historical narratives through which social identities are formed so as to articulate new subjects within alternative social and political alliances.[4] Thus, by emphasizing both contradiction and discontinuity within existing social and sexual hierarchies, it can show how all roles are *assigned* and changeable rather than natural and inevitable.

Numerous studies examining the Renaissance patriarchy have charted two contradictory historical trends that coexist in an uneasy relationship with each other: on the one hand, they have reconstructed a rigidly hierarchical model of gender relations as naturalized in a variety of orthodox discourses, such as Church sermons, marriage homilies, anti-feminist tracts, and conduct books. On the other hand, they also suggest that such images of a static patriarchal order are often a mode of wishful thinking, given the later, contradictory accounts of social historians and demographers who testify to a perception of a "crisis of order" in the face of sweeping economic displacements.[5] A crucial signifier of this "crisis of order" is the recurring image of unruly, rebellious women – "women on top."[6] While this image is marginalized and denigrated in the "public transcripts" of a hierarchical society, it repeatedly emerges in dramatic practices, folk festivals, and other aspects of popular tradition. Faced with

these contesting representations, can feminists pin down the experience of women's lives in terms of a pre-discursive "reality?"[7]

As a way out of this impasse, many feminist studies of the period attempt to make visible and to document the experience of women, often by searching for resistances *outside* the discursive constructions of the Renaissance patriarchy, as well as those of later male historians. Feminist anthologies of the 1980s, such as *Rewriting the Renaissance* and *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, certainly "marked a significant step toward [providing] a fuller, deeper, and more nuanced view of Medieval and Renaissance women and the cultures in which they lived."[8] Yet materialist feminist critics have also been quick to recognize that gender categories produced both within and outside the dramatic and cultural texts are precarious and problematic. And as one critic definitively points out, "the relationship between women's experience and the construction of women in cultural representations is the most problematic area for feminist criticism."[9]

Facing these conditions, a feminist historiography must recognize both the potential and the limitations of its epistemology. It is no longer the central issue that such a historiography distances itself from the "master discourses" of normative history and its agents. Where it faces a more difficult challenge is in historicizing women's experience without recourse to essentializing strategies. As feminist historians have incorporated new and multiple stories or subjects into orthodox history, they have established, as Joan Scott suggests, that "histories are written from fundamentally different – indeed irreconcilable – perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely 'true'" ("The Evidence," 776). But simply foregrounding the experience of the formerly disenfranchised has a limited impact, unless, as Scott argues, we "attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects, and produce their experience. It is *not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience*" (779, my emphasis). Experience, in this definition, is not the seen or felt "evidence that grounds what is known . . . but rather that about which knowledge is produced" (780).[10]

Scott's critique of contemporary historians has useful implications for any interventionist, feminist historiography and criticism. It suggests the need for dislodging ideological categories such as black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine or stereotypical roles of the worker, the black male, the third-world subject, among others. Such