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Shakespeare and sexuality

Ann Thompson

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.

The history of sexuality supposes two ruptures if one tries to center it on mechanisms of repression. The first, occurring in the course of the seventeenth century, was characterized by the advent of the great prohibitions, the exclusive promotion of adult marital sexuality, the imperatives of decency, the obligatory concealment of the body, the reduction to silence and mandatory reticences of language. The second, a twentieth-century phenomenon, was really less a rupture than an inflexion of the curve: this was the moment when the mechanisms of repression were seen as beginning to loosen their grip; one passed from insistent sexual taboos to a relative tolerance with regard to pre-nuptial or extra-marital relations; the disqualification of 'perverts' diminished, their condemnation by law was in part eliminated; a good many of the taboos that weighed on the sexuality of children were lifted.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 (1976),
translated by Robert Hurley (Penguin, 1990),
pp. 105–6 and p. 115.

'Sexuality' is a fashionable and controversial topic today, not just in literary studies but throughout the whole range of the humanities and social and behavioural sciences. It is both a new topic and an interdisciplinary one. This is explicitly recognized by the University of Chicago Press which publishes a periodical called the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, which claims to cover relevant areas 'from incest to infanticide,

from breast-feeding and women's sexuality to female prostitution, from pornography to reproductive politics, and from the first homosexual rights movement to AIDS'. Advertising for the journal stresses the marked increase in scholarship in the history of sexuality in the past decade, and points out that publications have been widely scattered across traditional subject boundaries in social, political and cultural studies. It is evident from the list of topics cited that this explosion of interest relates to the coming together of three current modes of academic discourse: feminism, post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and homosexual or gay studies. A modest amount of time spent browsing in any bookstore, library or even publisher's catalogue will demonstrate how much work is being done in all of these fields.

In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur claims that 'Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented',¹ but he argues that this 'invention' depended on the cultural reorientation that went on during the Renaissance period when there occurred a shift in perception from a one-sex model of humanity to a two-sex model: that is, instead of seeing the female body as a lesser (inverted) version of the male body, people began to see it as its incommensurable opposite. The early modern period does seem to feature heavily in histories of sexuality. As my second quotation from Foucault suggests, our twentieth-century focus on sexuality can perhaps be seen as a result of the loosening of the mechanisms of repression, while our interest in the seventeenth century can be seen as an attempt to investigate the supposed point of the imposition of those mechanisms. The strong influence of Foucault on literary critics (especially new historicists) has made it seem inevitable that the debate about sexuality is conducted primarily in terms of knowledge and power; despite Laqueur's investigation of the history of the disappearing female orgasm, it seems almost quaint these days to associate sexuality with pleasure.

Shakespeare studies have of course been affected by these debates. 'Shakespeare and Sexuality' was the topic of the twenty-fifth International Shakespeare conference at Stratford-upon-Avon in August 1992, and this volume includes several of the papers delivered at the conference. It also includes relevant essays from other volumes of *Shakespeare Survey* and other periodicals and two specially commissioned essays. A great deal of further work in this area has been published since 1992 and it is not practicable to attempt a complete retrospect of such scholarship; rather, I propose to draw out what seem to me to be a number of key concerns of the past two decades under some fairly broad general

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headings: 'Feminism', 'Men in Feminism and Gay Studies', 'The Boy Actor and Performance Studies' and 'Language'.

FEMINISM

In the preface to *Making Sex* Thomas Laqueur says that he could not have written the book 'without the intellectual revolution wrought by feminism since World War II and especially during the last twenty years'. Certainly in Shakespeare studies there can be no doubt that feminist criticism has been enormously influential in putting issues of sexuality and sexual difference on to the critical agenda. In his 1991 annotated bibliography of *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism*, Philip C. Kolin covers four hundred and thirty-nine items from the publication of Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* in 1975 to his cut-off point in 1988.² While all these books and essays could be seen to relate to the question of sexuality in the broadest sense, Kolin lists just thirty-eight items under 'sexuality (female)' in his subject index and eighteen under 'sexuality (male)', of which only thirteen are different from those listed under 'sexuality (female)'. A quite surprisingly high proportion of these, in fact about half, authored by both men and women, deal with the topic of male anxiety about female sexuality. Other topics which recur, but less frequently, are sexual stereotyping, sexuality (and sexism) in the reproduction and reading of Shakespeare, and ambivalence about male sexuality and the issue of homoeroticism.

The focus on male anxiety testifies to the prevalence of psychoanalytical approaches, especially in feminist criticism from North America. A strong tradition can be traced from *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays* edited by Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn in 1980³ through Kahn's own *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*,⁴ Majorie Garber's *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*,⁵ David Sundelson's *Shakespeare's Restoration of the Father*⁶ and Kay Stockholder's *Dream Works: Lovers and Families in Shakespeare's Plays*⁷ to Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers*⁸ and Valerie Traub's *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*⁹ (both published in 1992). At times earlier contributions to this approach have been attacked for exhibiting an ahistorical essentialism (see, for example, Kathleen McLuskie's essay 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*'),¹⁰ but it has provided us with many valuable insights into Shakespeare's treatment of infantile sexuality, female relationships, the formation of sexual identity, male bonding, misogyny, the fear of cuckoldry and other related issues.

The subtitle of Valerie Traub's book, *Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, is, as she explains, a deliberate allusion to Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* which was subtitled *The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*.¹¹ Greenblatt's work in that book as well as in his earlier *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*¹² has been an important influence on all critics who have examined the issue of individual identity in the early modern period, but there has been some tension between feminist critics and new historicist critics with the former accusing the latter of treating issues of sexuality almost entirely in terms of power to the exclusion of gender: see Lynda E. Boose, 'The Family in Shakespeare Studies; or – Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or – The Politics of Politics',¹³ Carol Thomas Neely, 'Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses'¹⁴ and my own 'Are There Any Women in *King Lear*?'¹⁵ In this respect, the work of Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* and especially in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*,¹⁶ has perhaps had an overly negative effect on our definitions of early modern sexuality. At the same time one should in fairness record that feminists have been accused of introducing a new kind of Puritanism into the discourse of sexuality.

Feminist critics have often objected to negative views of Shakespeare's female characters. They have argued that the plays are less sexist than the theatrical and critical traditions which continually reproduce them. Barbara Mowat pointed out in 1977 the discrepancy between Shakespeare's women and the way they are perceived by male characters,¹⁷ and other feminist critics have shown that male directors and critics are all too likely to agree with male characters – to take as it were Hamlet's view of Gertrude rather than Shakespeare's. Irene Dash has used stage history to demonstrate, in *Wooing, Wedding and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*,¹⁸ how regularly women's roles have been distorted and limited in productions, often with the effect of reducing a robust interest in sexuality to the more coy attitudes thought of as feminine by later ages. As long ago as 1957 Carolyn Heilbrun argued that Gertrude had been misunderstood and wrongly condemned by male critics;¹⁹ Linda T. Fitz explored a similar phenomenon in 'Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra*',²⁰ and Jacqueline Rose has argued in 'Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*' that the 'problems' in those plays relate to the sexual anxieties of male critics and their determination to hold female desire responsible for any breakdown in moral or aesthetic order.²¹

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Paradoxically, as Celia R. Daileader notes in her essay in this volume, ‘Shakespeare needs feminism’²²: despite attacks on ‘the patriarchal bard’ and revelations of the comparative misogyny of early modern culture, female readers and audience members as well as feminist students and critics have shown no desire to write him off; rather they have contributed to and enjoyed a lively and very much ongoing debate. Many of the most significant essays of the last twenty years have been collected in anthologies such as *Shakespeare and Gender* edited by Deborah H. Barker and Ivo Kamps²³ and *Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender* edited by Kate Chedgzoy.²⁴ Recent books have included the genre-based studies in Routledge’s ‘Feminist Readings of Shakespeare’ series (I should declare an interest as General Editor of this series). Volumes published so far are Philippa Berry’s *Shakespeare’s Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies*,²⁵ Coppélia Kahn’s *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*²⁶ and Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin’s *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare’s English Histories*.²⁷ All these books make use of current debates about gender and sexuality while displaying a scholarly awareness of the social and historical contexts of Shakespeare’s work. Such a dual focus is also evident in Catherine Belsey’s *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*,²⁸ whose subtitle, ‘The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture’, hints at the book’s slightly ironic take on how we re-read the past.

Men in feminism and gay studies

There has clearly been a male response to feminist criticism in the publication of a number of books dealing directly with men’s relationship to it: see for example *Men in Feminism* edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith²⁹ and *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* edited by Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden.³⁰ The work of many male critics is listed in Kolin’s annotated bibliography of *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism* though not all of them would necessarily describe themselves as feminists. One critic who has explicitly engaged with what it means to write as a male feminist is Peter Erickson whose *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare’s Drama* provides a clear and at times grim analysis of the sexual politics of the plays.³¹ In his recent *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* Erickson discusses in an afterword his own project which ‘involves undoing the automatic, apparently given, equation between Shakespeare as white male author and myself as white male critic’.³² In his essay in this volume, Michael Hattaway addresses his own discomfort

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in being a man 'reading as a woman' and attempting to analyse misogyny in Shakespearian texts.³³

At the same time, there has been a growing interest in the history and construction of homosexuality and lesbianism. Did they even exist in the modern sense in the Renaissance period? The issue has been explored by James M. Saslow in 'Homosexuality in the Renaissance: Behavior, Identity, and Artistic Expression'³⁴ and by Alan Bray in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*.³⁵ Literary scholars have also been contributing to this debate: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*³⁶ invigorated discussion by distinguishing between homosociality and homosexuality and locating male homoerotic desire in the specific social context of patriarchal heterosexuality. She discussed Shakespeare's *Sonnets* which are an inevitable focus of attention in this context, despite Margreta de Grazia's brave attempt in her paper in this volume to locate the 'scandal' elsewhere.³⁷ While the eighteenth century did its best to eliminate the tricky question of Shakespeare's own sexuality altogether, a twentieth-century scholar like Joseph Pequigney in *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* tries to put it back, claiming a specifically homosexual identity for the author and deploring the way that most commentators neglect or dispose of the issue.³⁸ Such an identity today (or, more precisely, such an implied commitment to specific erotic practices) is of course overshadowed by the history of AIDS which makes the association between desire and death grimly literal.

Other related areas of debate have been the differences between Marlowe and Shakespeare in this respect (see Marilyn J. Thorsen, 'Varieties of Amorous Experience: Homosexual and Heterosexual Relationships in Marlowe and Shakespeare',³⁹ and Joseph A. Porter, 'Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Canonization of Heterosexuality'⁴⁰), and the question of homoeroticism in *The Merchant of Venice* where the Antonio/Bassanio/Portia triangle has been read as a struggle between homosexual and heterosexual love (see Seymour Kleinberg 'The Merchant of Venice: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism',⁴¹ Keith Geary, 'The Nature of Portia's Victory: Turning to Men in *The Merchant of Venice*'⁴² and Karen Newman, 'Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*'.⁴³) Catherine Belsey's essay in this volume puts this debate into the context of the perceived distance between early modern culture and our own over the meaning of sexuality, noting how difficult it is for us to determine the meaning of terms like 'love' and 'desire' in relation to either heterosexual or homosexual relationships.⁴⁴

There has been far less written about lesbianism, though Valerie Traub has explored the question of homoerotic desire from a lesbian angle, especially in her chapters on ‘Desire and the Differences it Makes’ and ‘The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy’ in *Desire and Anxiety*.⁴⁵ Making use of feminist film criticism on the ‘male gaze’ and the positioning of the audience in relation to screen representations, she argues eloquently for an eroticism which does not flow directly from gender identity and is not limited to the binary homosexual/heterosexual opposition. (See also her more recent essay on ‘The (In)Significance of “Lesbian” Desire in Early Modern England’.⁴⁶)

Recent contributions to the area of gay studies include Kate Chedgzoy’s *Shakespeare’s Queer Children*,⁴⁷ which sees Shakespeare as an enabling and empowering force for a range of ‘other’ voices, including those of Oscar Wilde and Derek Jarman. Jeffrey Masten’s *Textual Intercourse*⁴⁸ explores the homoerotics of collaborative authorship in the drama of Shakespeare’s time, and the anthology *Queering the Renaissance*⁴⁹ edited by Jonathan Goldberg provides a wider context for homosexual, homoerotic and homosocial phenomena.

THE BOY ACTOR AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

Male homosexual desire in the Renaissance period is often represented as something which involves an age difference if not a sex difference: it is seen as the desire of adult men for ‘boys’, and the use of such terms for the younger partner as ‘ganymede’, ‘catamite’ and ‘ingle’ all testify to this. The boy actor of women’s parts has been the focus of considerable interest to gay critics as well as to feminist critics in recent years. At the same time a more general interest in transvestism as a widespread social phenomenon not exclusive to the Renaissance is shown in two recent books by prominent Shakespearean critics: Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*,⁵⁰ and Jonathan Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*,⁵¹ which has a chapter on ‘Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England’. In fact we still know extraordinarily little about the actual performers, their lives and careers, but we can argue, both from the texts themselves and from secondary material (notably the attacks on the immorality of the stage), that this particular dramatic convention gave rise to a number of debates about sexual identity, sexual difference and sexual transgression.

Several scholars working in this area have discussed cross-dressing as a real-life social phenomenon in Renaissance England as well as

a theatrical practice. They have investigated the social and religious background and the possible relationships between women wearing men's clothes on the streets and men wearing women's clothes on the stage. Such work includes Juliet Dusinberre's section on 'Disguise and the Boy Actor' in chapter 4 of *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*,⁵² Lisa Jardine's chapter on 'Female Roles and Elizabethan Eroticism' in *Still Harping on Daughters*,⁵³ Mary Beth Rose's essay on 'Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*',⁵⁴ Laura Levine's 'Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642',⁵⁵ Jonathan Dollimore's 'Subjectivity, Sexuality and Transgression',⁵⁶ Stephen Orgel's 'Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Renaissance Stage Take Boys for Women?'⁵⁷ and Jean E. Howard's 'Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England'.⁵⁸

Others have concentrated more specifically on the immediate dramatic effects of the convention: such work includes Paula S. Berggren's 'The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays',⁵⁹ Kathleen McLuskie's 'The Act, the Role, and the Actor: Boy Actresses on the Elizabethan Stage',⁶⁰ Mary Free's 'Shakespeare's Comedic Heroines: Protofeminists or Conformers to Patriarchy?',⁶¹ Matthew H. Winkler's '"As secret as maidenhead": The Profession of the Boy-Actress in *Twelfth Night*',⁶² Phyllis Rackin's 'Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage',⁶³ and Lorraine Helms's 'Playing the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism and Shakespearean Performance'.⁶⁴

A central issue of debate about the boy actor has been over whether the convention empowers women, by allowing female characters to adopt freedoms denied them in a patriarchal culture, or whether in the end the disguises serve only to reaffirm the sexual hierarchy. On the more positive side, critics such as Dusinberre, Berggren, and Rackin (as well as Catherine Belsey in 'Disrupting Gender Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies'⁶⁵) see at least the possibility for an escape from the constraints of femininity, an opening up of rigid gender distinctions, a playfulness with ideas of androgyny. On the negative side, critics such as Free and Howard reject the view of Shakespeare's heroines as proto-feminists and argue that cross-dressing on the stage was not in fact a strong site of resistance to traditional assumptions about gender. In this context, more than one critic has contrasted Shakespeare's use of the boy-disguised-as-a-girl-disguised-as-a-boy in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, usually arguing that Rosalind is empowered by her disguise while

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Viola is trapped by hers: see Nancy K. Hales' 'Sexual Disguise in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*'⁶⁶ and Valerie Traub's chapter on 'The Homosexuals of Shakespearean Comedy' in *Desire and Anxiety*.⁶⁷ Peter Erickson on the other hand has interpreted both the ending and the epilogue in *As You Like It* as means of containing and even eliminating female power.⁶⁸

The mid-1990s saw the appearance of some major studies in this field, notably Michael Shapiro's *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage*,⁶⁹ Laura Levine's *Men in Women's Clothing* (a book incorporating her earlier essay,⁷⁰) and Stephen Orgel's *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*.⁷¹

More generally, studies of Shakespeare's plays in performance, on stage and increasingly on film, are directly addressing issues of sexuality, as is evident in the essays by Celia R. Daileader and John Russell Brown in this volume.⁷² Recent collections of essays such as *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance* edited by James C. Bulman⁷³ and *Shakespeare the Movie* edited by Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt⁷⁴ contain several relevant contributions, and there has been a focus on the sexual politics of particular companies and productions in books like Elizabeth Schafer's *Ms-Directing Shakespeare*⁷⁵ and Penny Gay's *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*.⁷⁶

LANGUAGE

If sexuality is socially constructed, it is also, and necessarily on the English Renaissance stage, verbally constructed. Language itself, as feminist linguistics has shown, is far from being gender-neutral. Male/female stereotypes are built into everyday language use as well as into more elaborated literary contexts. In *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property*⁷⁷ Patricia Parker explores the sexual politics of Shakespeare's plays through an analysis of their rhetorical structures, arguing that the 'women are words, men deeds' cliché gave rise to an anxiety about effeminization associated with linguistic excess or 'fatness': Hamlet associates impotence with talking like a drab. Specific tropes such as *hysteron proteron*, *dilation* and *delation*, are seen as moulding the gender hierarchy in *King Lear* and the destruction of Desdemona in *Othello* respectively. Women's supposed lack of verbal self-control is associated with other kinds of 'fluency' or 'leakiness' by Gail Kern Paster in 'Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy'.⁷⁸

Men arguably control language, in the plays as in real life. In "The Blazon of Sweet Beauty's Best": Shakespeare's *Lucrece*', Nancy Vickers

shows how female characters such as Lucrece, Desdemona and Innogen can become victims of the *blazon*, the elaborated verbal description of a woman's beauty, a trope which originates in the male imagination and functions in situations of male rivalry.⁷⁹ To somewhat similar effect, though in relation to a very different text, Carol Cook claims in 'The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor: Reading Gender Difference in *Much Ado About Nothing*' that 'what is at stake is a masculine prerogative in language, which the play itself sustains'.⁸⁰ The contest in 'phallic wit' between Beatrice and Benedick contributes in the end to the survival of the masculine ethos. Women can play with words but men own them.

Some critics have been more optimistic about the possibility of a more positive feminine use of language. Deborah T. Curren-Aquino argues in 'Toward a Star that Danced: Woman as Survivor in Shakespeare's Early Comedies' that the women in these plays have more adaptable verbal skills than the men.⁸¹ Taking a comparable line on Isabella and Helena in 'Speaking Sensibly: Feminine Rhetoric in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*', Christy Desmet nevertheless concedes that the women are finally consigned to silence in a male world.⁸² Paradoxically, as Philip C. Kolin notes in the Introduction to his annotated bibliography of *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism*, many studies of women's distinctive language in the plays have in fact focused on their silence.⁸³

Sometimes, however, Shakespeare's women speak when male critics and directors would prefer them to be silent, and this is especially evident when they talk about sexuality. George Bernard Shaw revealed himself to be a true Victorian when he remarked of Beatrice that 'In her character of professed wit she has only one subject, and that is the subject which a really witty woman never jests about, because it is too serious a matter to a woman to be made light of without indelicacy.'⁸⁴ In *Wooing, Wedding and Power* Irene Dash points out that the part of the sexually outspoken Princess in *Love's Labour's Lost* has often been severely abbreviated, both on stage and in expurgated editions, in a series of attempts to save her from 'vulgarity' and to make her speech more 'ladylike' by post-Renaissance standards.⁸⁵ In his paper in this volume William C. Carroll discusses the issue of female sexuality and linguistic obscenity – an area which still poses problems for editors⁸⁶ – while Mary Bly examines the 'bawdy puns' of *Romeo and Juliet* and their transformation in the subsequent dramatic tradition from lyric to burlesque.⁸⁷ There has been a renewal of interest in the glossing and annotating of sexual language: Eric Partridge's 1947 classic *Shakespeare's Bawdy* was followed by Frankie Rubinstein's *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*.⁸⁸