

Thersites' Helen counterpart? Our heroine has very definitely turned up at the wrong place at the wrong time.

And she never bounces back from the "blow" that Ulysses has dealt her—never recovers her old composure. She now knows that, to the Greeks, superficial appearance is a substitute for the spiritual cleanliness that no-one is expected to possess. She has let herself down in her host nation's eyes; has paraded an ambiguous attitude towards vice and virtue by substituting the white (artificial purity) that should overpaint the black (corruption) with a Criseydean grey area which, to the Greeks, is closer to black than white. In a world where virtue amounts to keeping vice well hidden, Cressida has branded herself—quite unwittingly—as being hopelessly shallow. Should she now perform a *volte-face* and make a declaration of her affections she will only be regarded as a hypocrite as well as a whore.

She chooses, then, to play the game by the Greek rules—to do what everyone expects of her, she adopts Cresseid—the wanton sexual animal—as her new mask, a defence against obvious Greek hostility towards intelligent women.

Her new protector, however, is just like all men—especially Troilus. He wants a reward for his attentions—in the shape of sex—immediately, and Cressida is by now too hopelessly confused and frightened by her hostile reception to refuse. The new mask very quickly becomes a way of life and, before she knows it, she is in love with the new man in her life. She is the type of person who needs someone to adore and Diomedes may well prove to be no worse than Troilus who, remember, she has already seen through. In point of fact Henryson reveals him to be no better than his rival; he will eventually throw her over.

Criseyde / Cressida / Cresseid—what's in a name? In Shakespeare's case, nothing. He demonstrates that self-sacrifice to passion and the self-preservation instinct—the felt necessity both to feign aloofness for and indulge oneself in lust with the object of affection need not be mutually exclusive; that, placed in the right social setting (provided by the Trojan War chroniclers) there is no reason that Chaucer's and Henryson's character should not cohabit the one body. His play is a perfectly constructed bridge between its two major sources.

DISSIDENT READING: SUMMARY

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Once it was possible to assert that anti-Semitism is irrelevant to *The Merchant of Venice*. Lillian S. Robinson says she was persuaded of this; one should set it aside and address "the real point of the work"¹. The usual liberal-conservative way to retrieve the play nowadays is encapsulated in Helen Vendler's remark, which Christopher Ricks (in the course of a discussion of T.S. Eliot's anti-Semitism) endorses: "Shylock, in Shakespeare's imagination, grows in interest and stature so greatly that he incriminates the anti-Semitism of Belmont"². So, in a paradoxical sense, Shylock wins—not in the world, of course, but in Shakespeare's imagination. From the left, Terry Eagleton also finds Shylock the paradoxical victor: he "is triumphantly vindicated even though he loses the case: he has forced the Christians into outdoing his own "inhuman" legalism"; he unmasks "Christian justice as a mockery"³. It is Shylock who has respect for the spirit of the law, Portia who discredits the law through hyper-ingenious quibbling. Allen Bloom offers a staunchly right-wing interpretation. He says Shylock asks for trouble, for he has "the soul of a man who has refused to assimilate. He is consequently distrusted and hated. He reciprocates, and his soul is poisoned"⁴. It is all Shylock's fault, for not abandoning his own culture and adopting "western values".

So it is possible to get diverse readings from *The Merchant*, not all of them offensive. But what about ordinary readers and audiences who are situated partly or wholly in subordinate cultures—Jews, women, Blacks, lesbians and gay men, lower-class people? Should we expect them to unravel such intricately divergent readings in order to find a cultural space in which they may recognize themselves?

1 Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), p. 35.

2 Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 118. On reading *The Merchant*, see Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: California U.P. and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), pp. 299-302.

3 Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 37-8, 41.

4 Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1964; Chicago U.P., Midway Reprint, 1986), p. 21.

School students, for instance. "When someone with the authority of a teacher", Adrienne Rich says, "describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing... It takes some strength of soul –and not just individual strength, but collective understanding– to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard"⁵. If we accept any responsibility for the way our prized texts circulate beyond the academy, the routine classroom humiliation of ordinary readers from subordinated groups is our concern.

Traditionally, the ostensible project of literary criticism has been to seek the right answer to disputed readings. But in fact the essay that purports to settle such questions always provokes another. This is because both literary writing and Englit are involved in the processes through which our cultures elaborate themselves. The texts we call 'literary' characteristically address contested aspects of our ideological formation. When a part of our worldview threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then we reorganise and retell its story, trying to get it into shape –back into the old shape if we are conservative-minded, or into a new shape if we are more adventurous. There is nothing mysterious about this. Authors and readers want writing to be interesting, and these 'faultline' stories are the most promising for that. Further, in such contests, Shakespeare is a powerful cultural token. He is already where meaning is produced, and people therefore want to get him on their side. For there is no disinterested reading; Shakespeare is deployed in diverse ways –for instance in those readings of *The Merchant*, and now by me– as part of an ongoing cultural contest. We all know this, but it has been the historic project of Englit to efface it⁶.

The implications of these arguments for Englit are substantial, for it follows that meaning is not adequately deducible from the-text-on-the-page, or even from the-text-plus-suitably-selected-context. It is a key proposition of cultural materialism that the specific historical conditions in which cultural institutions and formations organise and are organised by textualities must be addressed. Within such a perspective, the relations between mainstream readings and those from subordinated groups becomes a proper and a necessary focus of attention.

5 Adrienne Rich, *Bood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 199.

6 See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: California U.P. and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), ch. 2 et passim; Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Blackwells and Berkeley, California U.P., 1989), ch. 3.

John Addington Symonds, the Victorian man of letters, read Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* before he was ten, and it changed his life. Hitherto, what Symonds calls his 'reveries' had generally 'reverted' to 'naked sailors'. But then he read Shakespeare's poem:

It gave form, ideality and beauty to my previous erotic visions. Those adult males, the shaggy and brawny sailors, without entirely disappearing, began to be superseded in my fancy by an adolescent Adonis. The emotion they symbolized blent with a new kind of feeling. In some confused way I identified myself with Adonis; but at the same time I yearned after him as an adorable object of passionate love⁷.

Suppose, Symonds wonders, his predisposition had been heterosexual? –"Boys of more normal sexuality might have preferred the 'Rape of Lucrece'", he says (rather a chilling thought). Or, in *Venus and Adonis* "they might have responded to the attraction of the female– condemning Adonis for a simpleton, and wishing themselves for ten minutes in his place" (p. 63). Gay boys, it seems, read differently from other boys. And women, surely, might want to make of the poem something different again.

But could Shakespeare have been gay? The Sonnets have caused most anxiety, and not only in our self-conscious times. Quite a lot may be sacrificed in order to dispel the spectre of bardic queerness. Eric Partridge, in his study *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947), supported the idea that "most of the Sonnets may be read as literary exercises". It seemed safer to abandon the integrity of the poetry than to admit that Shakespeare might have been like that⁸. Here again, Shakespeare is a powerful cultural token: Partridge is trying to secure Shakespeare for heterosexuality. A recent biographer of Shakespeare, Garry O'Connor, contains the danger by pigeon-holing the Earl of Southampton (principal candidate for the beautiful young man of the Sonnets and *Venus and Adonis*), Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe in modern stereotypes. The earl had an "intensely feminised" nature, O'Connor says, and "played up to his admirers... with a dark and neurotic mixture of arrogance and bashfulness" (treacherous queer). Marlowe, who had a "dark taste", fell for it: he conceived a "passion for Southampton"– though it

7 Phyllis Grosskurth, ed., *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), pp. 62-3.

8 Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York: Dutton, 1948), pp. 13-8. Other critical evasions are amusingly displayed by Simon Shepherd, 'Shakespeare's Private Drawer: Shakespeare and Homosexuality', in Graham Holderness, ed., *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester U.P., 1988).

was "pure wish-fulfilment" on Marlowe's part (silly queen)⁹. But Shakespeare, O'Connor asserts, was interested only in Southampton's patronage; he was "far too mindful of his own skin to write sonnets of homosexual love" (closet case?, p. 143). Integrity is a price worth paying to secure heterosexuality.

Recent scholarship on homosexuality in Shakespeare's time has mostly started from Michel Foucault's thesis in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*: early-modern England did not have a concept of 'the homosexual'. The big shift occurs in the nineteenth century, when the person who engages in same-sex activity gets to be perceived as a personality type. So far from the Victorians repressing sex, Foucault brilliantly observes, they went on about it all the time; it became a principal mode of social regulation. As part of this process, the

homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

Alan Bray in his book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* substantiates much of Foucault's case, showing how acts of sodomy were scapegoated, within a general category of debauchery, in legal discourses¹⁰.

However, this should not lead us to assume that it was altogether impossible to self-identify as a sodomite in Shakespearean times. Bruce R. Smith proposes in *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* that we recognize different kinds of discourse: moral, legal, medical, and poetic. Same-sex practices were valued distinctively in poetic writing, largely contradicting moral and legal discourses, because of the huge prestige of ancient Greek and Roman texts. Smith discovers, not a homosexual identity in any modern sense, but six "cultural scenarios" for same-sex relations, founded in classical sources. Within such a network of possibilities, individuals might negotiate quite diverse sexual alignments¹¹. Also, it is not necessary to assume, with Foucault, that history falls into epochs, characterized by distinct modes of thought, with change occurring through a sequence of large-scale epistemological shifts. We should

9 Garry O'Connor, *William Shakespeare a Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), pp. 95-6.

10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books), p. 43. Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982).

11 Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* (Chicago U.P., 1991), pp. 13-4, 74-6. See further Alan Bray, 'Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England', *History Workshop*, 29 (1990), 1-19; Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodomities* (Stanford U.P., 1992).

not expect an even development, whereby one model characterizes an epoch and then is superseded by another. There may have been in early-modern Europe, especially in highly privileged circles, coterie where something like our concept of the homosexual individual occurred. That concept need not have been generally known, and need not have been coherent with, or even have affected, wider patterns of sexuality and gender. Ideology is never tidy, though ideologues present it as though it were. So even if certain figures were recognizably continuous with our idea of "a homosexual", a gay identity might still be inaccessible—incomprehensible—to almost everyone. I have a strong suspicion that the quest for the moment at which the modern homosexual subject is constituted is misguided. I suspect that what we call gay identity has, for a long time, been always in the process of getting constituted—as the middle classes have been always rising; or, more pertinently, as the modern bourgeois subject has for a long time been in the process of getting constituted.

The key point is that early-modern Britons drew the boundaries of sexualities in different places from ourselves. In particular, they did not associate male same-sex practices specifically with "effeminacy". Up to the time of the Oscar Wilde trials, I think—far later than is generally supposed—it is unsafe to interpret effeminacy as defining of, or as a signal of, same-sex passion. Mostly, it meant being emotional and spending too much time with women. Thus it often involved excessive cross-sexual attachment. To be manly was of course to go with women, but in a way that did not forfeit mastery. In Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Samson's explanation of his subjection to Dalila is: "foul effeminacy held me yoked / Her bondslave"¹².

One model of same-sex passion involved the lord and his minion, the catamite, the Ganymede. Only the latter was considered effeminate—because he occupied the subordinate position of the woman. In the opening scene of Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage* the problem is not that Jupiter is playing with Ganymede, but that he is not attending to imperial business. Aeneas is said to be effeminate when he neglects his imperial destiny—distracted by Dido. The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida* does not make Achilles effeminate; his love for Polyxena does that, keeping him from the war.

More surprisingly, to us, two warriors may proclaim mutual affection comparable to that between man and woman. So long as they are being very

12 *Samson Agonistes*, lines 410-11, in John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (Oxford U.P., 1969).

warrior-like, there is no embarrassment. Coriolanus, in Shakespeare's play, compares his embrace of his comrade Cominius to his honeymoon night; Aufidius' greeting to Coriolanus is in the same vein. Coriolanus is said to usurp the place of the maid Aufidius married, but he does not become feminine¹³. It is submitting to the Citizens that risks that, and to his mother. "Thou boy of tears", Aufidius accuses (V.vi.101). The taunt means not that Coriolanus has become a homosexual, but that he has submitted to his mother. This shifts his relations with men out of the heroic friendship model and into the Ganymede model.

Engaging in same-sex practices, then, didn't make you either a homosexual or effeminate; in certain circumstances it made you specially masculine. The early-modern organisation of sex and gender boundaries, simply, was different from ours. And therefore Shakespeare couldn't have been gay. However, that need not stem the panic, because, by the same token, he couldn't have been straight either. In practice, the plays are pervaded with erotic interactions that strike chords for lesbians and gay men today, as they did for Symonds. Friendships are conducted with a passion that would now be considered suspicious; language of sexual flirtation is used in circumstances where we would find it embarrassing; and all the women's parts may, legitimately, be played by young men (I grant that this may not, immediately, be good news for women). It is not, necessarily, that Shakespeare was a sexual radical; rather, the ordinary currency of his theatre and society is sexy for us. Shakespeare may work with distinct force for gay men and lesbians, simply because he didn't think he had to sort out sexuality in modern terms. For approximately the same reasons, these plays may incite radical ideas about gender, class, race and nation.

So perhaps neither *Venus and Adonis*, nor Symonds' response to it, are as strange and remote as they may seem. Perhaps Symonds' reading is and was valid –not as the one, true reading, but as a haunting possibility that may be ignored or repudiated, but will not go away.

These arguments are developed in Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, and London: Routledge, 1994).

¹³ Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Broackbank, New Arden edn (London: Methuen, 1976), I.vi. 29-32, IV.v. 114-19.

DR. FAUSTUS AND DON JUAN, TWO BAROQUE HEROES

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Renaissance had a different echo in the different countries of Europe. In France, for example, the continuous contacts with Italy, owing to the wars against Charles V on Italian soil, were to be the cause of the quick break with Medieval thought and forms; but, on the other hand, the wars of Religion were a handicap for the full development of Renaissance splendour, and, literally speaking, the country did not reach the highest point of Renaissance mood until the time of Louis XIV.

In England, the development of economic activity was to be accompanied by a parallel process in the artistic and intellectual fields. Perhaps owing to the natural, insular isolation, the Renaissance entered the country much later than on the continent, as a result, it could profit fully from French, Italian and Spanish influences. In fact when the new mood made its way into England it was more Baroque than pure Renaissance. By universal agreement no writer has ever been able to portray all kinds of passions in the human heart better than Shakespeare: faith, love and happiness, but also revenge, violence, hate and pain. He is not just the writer of the Renaissance but of the exaggeration of passions which would be the most outstanding characteristic of the Baroque, but all these ingredients were already present in his most important forerunner: Christopher Marlowe, himself a flamboyant, baroque character.

Like in England, in Spain the period between the 16th Century and the beginning of the 17th Century is, without doubt, the most important period of Spanish culture, both for the quantity and quality of scientific and literary works and the influence that Spanish thought had in all literary genres, expressing Spanish originality and depth of thought.

The Religious revolution which stirred the Europe of the Renaissance followed different paths in the two countries which, nevertheless, continued having a kind of love-hate relationship. The first part of the 17th century is perhaps the time in which England and Spain reached, on the one hand, the greatest degree of understanding while, at the same time, an antagonism was developing between them that would not end for a long time.