

Anthony Guy Patricia. 2017. *Queering the Shakespeare Film: Gender Trouble, Gay Spectatorship and Male Homoeroticism*. London and New York: Bloomsbury

Goran Stanivukovic, ed. 2017. *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*. London and New York: Bloomsbury

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Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare has simultaneously brought to life two different titles concerned with Shakespeare and queerness: a monograph on the Shakespeare film and a collection of essays on Shakespeare's works approached from a queer angle. This apparent coincidence in approach does not go far since, in fact, these two volumes have nothing in common apart from the use of the term 'queer' in their respective titles. Whereas Patricia focuses on just a few filmic adaptations of several plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*), Stanivukovic's volume broadens its scope including most of Shakespeare's dramatic production plus his lyric poetry and, being a collection, offers a much more heterogeneous approach.

Queering the Shakespeare Film, in the words of its author, "critiques the various representations of the queer – broadly understood as that which is at odds with what has been deemed to be the normal, the legitimate and the dominant – particularly (but not exclusively) as regards sexual matters in the Shakespeare film" (xxii). In fact, that seems to be the aim of the study, even though, curiously enough, the term 'queer' is taken for granted and is never defined, not even problematized or discussed in any relevant way. It is true that, scattered throughout the book, most of the issues queer theory is concerned with appear, but a more systematic approach is missing. Patricia does not even happen to think that 'queerness' is not a synonym for 'gayness' and both concepts seem to blur throughout the whole volume. The relevant theorizations of Judith Butler, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick or David Halperin are considered, but one misses an in-depth discussion of their conceptualization of

'queerness' as something different from, and in many cases in conflict with 'gay and lesbian.' Concerning this central and immensely productive theoretical and methodological struggle over terminology, the absence of any reference to the contributions of authors such as Teresa de Lauretis (the first to use the term 'queer' as a methodological approach), Leo Bersani or Michael Warner, among many others, is picturesque, to say the least.

That is, in my view, the main flaw the reader can encounter in this monograph: a continuous feeling of uneasiness with the methodological tools used. The book is a valuable analytical survey of interesting gay (and sometimes lesbian) features the films under scrutiny pose, covering a vast period of time starting with Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) and ending with Alan Brown's *Private Romeo* (2011), but the author continuously mixes up methods and terminology in a rather puzzling way.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Reinhardt and Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an adaptation Patricia hastens to label as imbued with "the queer problematics of gender, sodomy, marriage and masculinity" (1) immediately stating that "[t]his queerness manifests first of all in the style of Hippolyta's costuming and more especially in the disdainful way the former queen of the Amazons acts toward Theseus" (3-4). What he offers after this statement is a depiction of this female character as a lesbian (following the parameters for such an identity established by heteronormativity) reluctant to accept a heterosexual marriage with the Duke of Athens. He even quotes Halperin's famous definition of 'queer' ("*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (8)) to substantiate his reading of the character in the film, obviously missing the fact that, from a twenty-first century perspective, Hippolyta's performance fits quite well within her expected identity as a lesbian and, therefore, has nothing to do with being "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant." The same kind of flawed interpretation appears a few pages afterwards when discussing the characters of Lysander and, to a lesser extent, Demetrius. Patricia, again, falls into the trap of equating 'gayness' and 'queerness' when concluding:

So Reinhardt and Dietele's Lysander, who takes delight in hopping, skipping and often speaking in falsetto, is coded effeminate in a specifically contemporary way because of those behaviours rather

than because of his love for Hermia as would have been the case during the Renaissance in England. And that is a queer representation indeed. (36-37)

As he himself recognizes a few sentences before, this “is the late nineteenth-/twentieth-/early twenty-first-century stereotype of the male homosexual” (36) and, therefore, again, the normal, legitimate and dominant representation of such a figure in heteronormative contexts, something totally at odds with what a queer approach would do with such a situation and character.

Even though this is the usual tendency in the book, at times a much queerer perspective is adopted in reading certain instances in the films. Continuing with the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the author discusses the issues of bestiality and adult/child eroticism in the figures of Oberon and Titania and he quotes Richard Rambuss in order to assert that “the forest...is a ‘dreamscape lush with sexual possibilities: not only the homoeroticism that sometimes encumbers, sometimes oils the marriage machine of Shakespearean comedy, but also child-love, anality, and bestiality’” (30). Patricia then confirms with his own words that “Oberon and Titania, the straight couple, are the transgressors *par excellence* when it comes to bestiality and adult/child eroticism” (30), an assertion that effectively aligns them with a disruption of the normal and accepted sexual order, no matter their homo or heterosexual inclinations.

But this approach is rather the exception than the rule in a book where we find predominantly a tendency to equate queer and gay. That confusion appears in the rest of the chapters that make up the volume. Chapter 2 is devoted to three different productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, namely, George Cukor's (1936), Franco Zeffirelli's (1968) and Brown's *Private Romeo* (2011), and in all three cases the same sense of confusion pervades the analysis. He takes into account the miscast of Cukor's adaptation with mature actors performing the adolescent roles and considers their mature age as a clear instance of queerness in the film. So far, his perception, explicitly corroborated with the analysis offered by Richard Burt, is totally plausible, something that cannot be said about the other two films, discussed following the typical patterns of a gay, and not so queer, approach. In this respect, a case in point is his discussion of *Private Romeo*, a film about eight American cadets in a military academy first performing and then assuming in their own lives the text of the star-

crossed lovers' tragedy. Patricia fails here to even discuss the fact that in Shakespeare's times the female roles were performed by young actors and thus, to have an actor delivering Juliet's or the Nurse's lines as if they were women does not have to be read as a disruptive strategy in itself. It is true that Brown's approach is a queer one in many instances, but not in the ones Patricia decides to label as such.

Chapter 3 offers the promise of a queer reading of Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Baz Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* applying the Butlerean concept of 'gender trouble.' The author endeavours to follow his aim in a systematic way but, again, his problematic conception of what that concept could mean prompts certain contradictory reasoning. Thus, he takes for granted that Cesario's erotic interest in Orsino must be read as homosexual, even though the role is performed by an actress (100). He, however, neglects to mention that it is in the very narrative of the play, preserved in the filmic version, where that homosexual (but not queer) reading is cancelled, since the actress is just performing the role of a female character (Viola) in disguise, thus preserving the heterosexual attraction she feels for the Duke. Many other examples in this same vein could be noted, but suffice it to say that this is persistently the kind of unqueer readings Patricia offers of the Shakespeare film.

The book is completed with chapter 4, devoted to male homoerotics in the already mentioned film by Nunn and Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and chapter 5, where he discusses Orson Welles' and Oliver Parker's filmic adaptations of *Othello*. At the end, Guy Patricia concludes:

The overall summation of this book is one that is intuitive: the arc of queering the Shakespeare film seems to follow more or less the arc of history. As Western society became more knowledgeable about and less fearful of, more accepting and less condemnatory of, queerness in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—particularly queerness in its homosexual forms—the Shakespeare film followed suit. (219)

Which, in my reading, means that the Shakespeare film (at least all the commercial films featured) presents gay characters, gay situations and homoerotic desire in an overt way, but always following the prescriptive method sanctified by Western

heteronormative society for the representation of gay male desire. This method is none other than an assimilation of homosexuality as envious of the original and superior haven offered by heterosexuality. No more and no less.

If Patricia focuses on the gay reception of Shakespeare in filmic texts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the volume edited by Goran Stanivukovic takes a reverse path projecting a queer late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Shakespeare into a contemporary queer milieu. In his introduction to this collection of essays, the editor postulates:

If Shakespeare came before queer theory in the sense that his texts anticipate some of the ideas upon which queer theory would later be built, his texts also contributed to the queer structure of thinking about polymorphous sexuality, in a way that closes the gap between the pastness of Shakespeare and the contemporariness of queer theory. (13)

However, this 'closing of the gap' cannot be considered an attempt to force contemporary significance into the past; on the contrary, the texts themselves contain a multiplicity of significations among which a present day critic and reader can discover some closely linked to our own contemporary queer theory and practice.

The volume aims to redefine the very concept of queerness expanding its epistemological productivity to fields which, at least at first sight, could not fit unproblematically within the scope of such a term. That is the reason why it seems quite necessary to devote a great part of the introduction to a critical analysis of the way 'queer' is understood both by scholars concerned with early modern literature and by queer theorists and academics whose work is more focused on contemporary queer culture. In this respect, an extensive and well documented survey of these different kinds of criticism applied to Shakespeare and the Renaissance helps the reader to clearly situate the essays in the volume in relation to previous literature on the subject.

Apart from this introductory chapter, the book is divided into three parts concerned respectively with "queer time," "queer language," and "queer nature," labels that function as mere indicators of a central concern in each section that expands to questions of desire and sexuality in quite diverse Shakespearean texts. This division, Stanivukovic advises,

should be taken as a way of stimulating further critical thinking about queer Shakespeare by identifying notions that the chapters in each part offer as a way of starting critical conversation, not clear-cut thematic categories that neatly correspond to topics explored in each of the chapters within the three parts. (26)

And, in complete coherence with this advice, the reader will find not only chapters on erotic discourses (chapter 1: “Which is worthiest love’ in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*”; chapter 3: “The Sport of Asses: A *Midsummer Night’s Dream*”), but also on the queerness of early modern English due to the profound changes the English language was undergoing (at the time) (chapter 2: “Glass: The Sonnets’ Desiring Object”; chapter 5: “The Queer Language of Size in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*”; chapter 7: “Desiring H: *Much Ado About Nothing* and the Sound of Women’s Desire”) and on desire, environment and nature in general (the third part: “Queer Nature”)

The two books under review deal with the same object of enquiry, Shakespeare’s works, but the methodological tools used are different. A queer perspective undoubtedly guides both projects, but the way of understanding that perspective really diverges. While Patricia presents a rather constrictive and reductive view of queerness, most of the time equating it with the identity-based concept of gayness, the contributors to Stanivukovic’s volume opt for a broader, more expansive notion that allows for unprecedented analyses of the Shakespearean corpus and for new and challenging approaches to the critically productive potential of queer theory and methodology.¹

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